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I, SAID THE FLY



Elizabeth Ferrars

wrote

Give a Corpse a Bad Name

Remove the Bodies

Death in Botanist's Bay

Don't Monkey With Murder

Your Neck in a Noose



I, SAID THE FLY

By Elizabeth Ferrars

LONDON

**HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED**

TO F. AND V.

First printed April, 1945

*This book is produced in complete
conformity with the authorised
economy standards*

**Made and Printed in Great Britain for Hodder & Stoughton, Limited, London,
by Wymian & Sons Limited, London, Reading and Fakenham**

I

ONE DAY IN THE SPRING OF NINETEEN-FORTY-ONE KAY Bryant walked along Little Carberry Street. She had come to see what the blitz had done to it. She had heard it had done a good deal. So it had, she discovered. Number Ten itself, together with Eight and Twelve, had completely vanished. The Blue Pigeon was a jagged ruin. On the site of the café where Kay had once sat and talked of crime with Detective Inspector Cory, stood a tank for the use of the N.F.S. The little delicatessen had gone and so had the dairy, and nearly all the windows facing on to the street had been boarded up.

As she stood looking up at those obliterated windows Kay remembered the curtains of soiled yellow lace, furtively drawn, that had been so popular in the days when all those disreputable but dignified eighteenth-century façades, with their beautiful doorways, had still been intact and bugs had been a more imminent danger than bombs. Little Carberry Street in those days had been pretty squalid. But now the squalor, like a far earlier respectability, had entirely departed. The era of bugs, bawdy-houses, dirty lace curtains, barrel-organs, shrieking children and Detective Inspectors had been blotted out by the bombs and the demolition-squads between them. Desolation had taken their place. Kay found it a very curious discovery.

In most ways too she found it a very sad one, for those tall, plain houses had been far handsomer than any that were likely to replace them, and the whole district had had its raffish charm. Yet as she started walking away a

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feeling almost of relief came over her, a feeling that she wondered at, that she had not expected. It was as if, now that she had seen this emptiness and stillness, this end of so many things, there was a possibility that she might at last find herself forgetting some of the horror that had happened while she lived there, a possibility that this visit to a bomb-wrecked street might help along the blotting-out of some grim memories of murder.

Kay, in that spring before the war, had been twenty-nine, a quiet-looking, slim young woman with smooth black hair, grey eyes rather too large for her pale, pointed face, and an abrupt manner that covered a considerable shyness. The abruptness had given her an air of decision that had never been too well supported by her acts. One of the few really decided acts of her life had taken place about a year before her first arrival in Little Carberry Street, when she had suddenly parted from her husband. More often she had been content with drifting. She had drifted into an art-school, she had drifted into marriage, and eventually she had drifted into a bed-sittingroom on the top floor of Number Ten Little Carberry Street, washed up there by extreme shortage of money.

Certainly in those days there had been plenty of squalor there. In the daytime the street had been filled by the shrill voices of swarms of ill-dressed, underfed children and the clatter of their rollerskates on the pavements. There had been an almost constant jingling of barrel-organs and shouting of hawkers and some occasional declamation and hymn-singing by odd little religious groups that had sometimes held services at the corner. The nights had been disturbed by the singing of home-going drunks, now and then by screams and shouts and fighting in the street, and once Kay had been awakened by the sudden entry of three policemen into her bed-sittingroom. They had apologized for

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their mistake yet they had not left until they had flashed their torches all round the room. Kay had never learnt what or whom they had wanted, and she had not concerned herself much to find out, for she had known when she went to live in Little Carberry Street that that was the sort of thing she was in for. Once in the morning she had looked out of the window and had seen two elephants walking down the middle of the street. Again, because it was in Little Carberry Street, the sight had not greatly surprised her.

The rent for her bed-sitting-room and tiny kitchenette had been thirteen and sixpence. During the four years of her marriage she had lost all her old connections in the advertising world and was having to work her way in again slowly and painfully, so that figure had had considerable attractions. Also the fact that some friends of hers lived on the floor below her had helped to reconcile her to the conditions of life at Number Ten, and on the whole she had been happy enough there. Yet although as a rule the neighbourhood, with its noises and smells and its dirty, vital children, playing their dangerous games in the gutter, had interested and intrigued her, there had been times when, as she got off the bus and took the turning to the left, a feeling had come over her made up of disquiet at the noise and disgust at the dirt, fused together into an exhausted certainty of her own inability to cope with the strain of living. Unfortunately it had happened that that afternoon, that Wednesday when it all began, had been one of her bad days. . . .

It had started with trouble at Lynes'. She had done a book-jacket for them, her work had been criticised, she had lost her temper and had been too unsure of herself to show it. Besides that, she had not really recovered yet from an attack of 'flu. When she reached home and pushed open the street-door, and when the smell of the staircase

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surged out at her, the indescribable smell of a Bloomsbury staircase, which always seems as if it must have been accumulating there through the centuries, the tiredness, irritability and depression that flooded her whole being at that instant made her feel physically sick.

Glancing at the letter-rack in the hall and seeing nothing addressed to herself, she started slowly up the steep, uncarpeted, unscrubbed stairs. As she did so she became aware that the whole house was full of the sound of hammering. It came from the top landing and she immediately guessed its cause. Pamela Fuller, the new tenant of the back room, had been boasting to the other tenants for the last few days that Miss Lingard, the landlady, had agreed to install a gas-fire in her room; Kay herself had had the same struggle with Miss Lingard when she first moved in, indeed it had been Kay who had told Miss Fuller that to wring a gas-fire out of Miss Lingard was not beyond the bounds of possibility; now the gas-fire had arrived. But that it should arrive that afternoon, just that afternoon, was too much to bear. There was a scowl on Kay's face and she was swearing to herself in the vocabulary she had picked up from the poet of some imagination who had been her husband, when she reached the top of the stairs.

Two men in shirtsleeves were kneeling on the floor. They had removed some of the floorboards to lay the new piping, and in the hole that gaped between them some of the massive, ancient joists were visible. One of the men, looking up at Kay as she stood hesitating, told her laconically: "We ain't saying our prayers, miss, we're just two little mice." Edging back so that she could step across the hole, they waited until she had gone into her room, then resumed their hammering.

Throwing down the portfolio containing the sketches that young Lyne had not liked, Kay thoughtlessly struck

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a match and stooped to light the fire. But the gas had of course been turned off at the main. Flinging the match away, she crossed to the door, put her head out and asked : "Any idea how long you're likely to be ?"

"Sorry, miss, couldn't say," one of the men answered.

"These 'ere old beams," said the other, "is so thick it's the devil and all to get through 'em, see ?"

"You should've been at a place we done in Russell Square," said the first with enthusiasm. "Two lots of beams, one on top of the other, and all as thick as this 'ere. Gorlomme, thought we'd be all night, the time it took us to get through !"

"I see—thanks." Closing the door again, Kay sat down dispiritedly on the edge of the divan. It was one of those moments when she felt as if she could not endure one day longer in Little Carberry Street.

Yet her room was very pleasant. It still had the old panelling, painted a pale green. There were two big sash-windows, framed with rust-coloured curtains, and there were some cheap, bright rugs on the floor. Though the furniture was all cheap, undistinguished and rather battered, Kay usually felt proud of what she had succeeded in making out of almost nothing. But that day, that unlucky Wednesday, with the hammering outside, her fire unlit and a sharp headache developing, she felt that the place was as cramping and sordid as a prison.

Presently the gas-fitters moved on from the landing into the next room and Kay was forced to listen to their conversation, which came with relentless clarity through the thin partition wall. It related mostly to football, though the men also showed some interest in George Formby. Unable to make up her mind what to do with herself, Kay started walking about the room. She was roaming round it, still wearing her coat and smoking a cigarette, when

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someone knocked at her door. When she opened it she found Pamela Fuller on the landing.

Pamela was about Kay's own age and was short and broad and given to wearing tweed costumes and flannel blouses. Her face was large and pale and faintly freckled, her eyes were a light brown. She was very full-breasted and had a plumply shapeless body. Her hair was fair, springy and bobbed and when she took off her hat the curls sprang up all round her head like the fluff on a dandelion.

She greeted Kay, as usual, with a sharp volley of words : " You don't mind if I come in, do you, Mrs. Bryant ? I can't stay in my room with those men there, and I'm dead beat—absolutely dead beat. I've had an exhausting day with everything and everybody worrying at me. D'you get those days ? You can't think why it happens but everything seems to happen at the same time. I've bitten off the head of at least three important people. Probably it'll take me weeks to put it right." Walking in, she dropped heavily into Kay's armchair. " You probably don't know what I mean. I should think you're one of those balanced, controlled people ; I don't suppose you ever do things you know you're going to regret like hell the very next minute. D'you happen to have a cigarette ? "

Picking up a packet, Kay handed it to her.

" Thanks," said Pamela. " I say, you're sure you don't mind my walking in on you like this ? It's a godsend if you don't ; I feel I've just got to sit down somewhere."

Kay managed to answer that Pamela was welcome. But she did not feel much drawn to Miss Fuller. At their first meeting, learning that she was secretary to a refugee-organization, Kay had decided that this girl with the dumpy body, pale, earnest face and brisk manner must certainly be some parson's daughter, born to and educated

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for good works. But since then she had realised that there was a strangeness about Pamela Fuller ; there was an unusual emotional intensity in her, something that suggested a streak of unexpected sensuality, even of violence in her nature.

Puffing out smoke, Pamela went on : " I don't know how other tenants have managed to exist in there without a gas-fire. One week of lugging coal up those stairs has been enough for me. Besides, that no doubt very handsome eighteenth-century fireplace, or whatever it is, simply yawns wide open to the sky and lets in the most horrible draughts while it sends whatever heat there might be straight up the chimney. And I don't like getting home at five or six in the evening and having to spend the first half hour coaxing some reluctant sticks to burn. Personally, I'm all for modern conveniences.' By the way,"—she shifted the cigarette from one corner of her mouth to the other—"I've just been having a chat with Mr. Ivory."

"It's Mr. Hay," Kay corrected her.

"It says Ivory on the bell."

"It's Miss Ivory, but Mr. Hay."

"Oh," said Pamela, "it's like that, is it?" She jogged her stumpy foot up and down. "Miss Ivory's extraordinarily beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes, uncommonly so," Kay agreed.

"But I can't make her out."

"Trying to make Melissa Ivory out," said Kay, "gets most of us nowhere. She's a very odd person."

"Somehow I never expect beautiful people to be odd," said Pamela with a sigh. "I never see why they should *need* to be. However, as I was just starting to tell you, I was coming upstairs and I met Mr. Ivory—I mean Mr. Hay—and he told me in that funny, wandering, gossipy

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way of his, that Miss Ivory thinks she's going to succeed in getting the ground-floor tenant turned out. I didn't say much because I don't know anything about the ground-floor tenant, but I gathered there'd been a long campaign on foot about it and that Miss Lingard was beginning to show signs of weakening. Can you explain it all to me? What does the ground-floor do that Miss Ivory doesn't like?"

"Well, it seems that Mrs. Flower loans her front room to a lot of her girl-friends and their gentlemen acquaintances," said Kay, "and presumably takes a commission on the transaction."

"Ah," said Pamela, nodding her head, "actually I'd suspected something of the sort myself, but I wasn't sure—I wasn't sure if it was that or politics. There's always such an abnormal number of people going in or out of the place that it had to be one or the other. And I don't think most of them really looked as if they were coming to a political meeting. But tell me, doesn't Miss Lingard realise it?"

"Of course she does."

"Then why . . . ?"

"I suppose she gets her rent," said Kay. "As a matter of fact, this flat up here used to be run on the same lines till quite recently, so Melissa told me. When she and Ted first moved in and started a development towards semi-respectability, the whole place was a sink-of-iniquity—" She stopped suddenly. "D'you think they can possibly have finished?" she asked, for she had just realised that the men next door had stopped hammering.

Pamela said she did not think it was likely. But certainly, except for a soft murmuring of voices, the sounds next door had broken off.

"I wish they'd get on with it," said Kay, "I want to

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light the fire." She shivered, for there was not much warmth in the March afternoon. Over the housetops the sky was a grey mass of hurrying clouds. Dribbles of smoke were flattened out above the roofs and vanished in thin wisps on the wind.

Crossing to the untidily littered table between the two windows, Kay started picking a few faded blooms out of a bowl of daffodils.

"If they don't finish soon," she said, "I shall have to go to the pictures. It's too cold to stay here like this. Or we might go out and have some tea at the Express. What d'you think?"

"I'm awfully sorry about it, you know," said Pamela. "Since it's my fire I feel I'm really responsible. And you're only just out of bed after that attack of 'flu, aren't you?—and not looking as if you ought to be out and about at all. I really am sorry, Mrs. Bryant. And d'you know"—she broke off, suspicion suddenly flaming in her eyes—"d'you know, I don't believe those men are getting on with the job at all! I believe they're just sitting in there, having a quiet smoke. And then I suppose they'll come in here and say they can't finish this evening and have got to leave the gas turned off till to-morrow!"

"Oh, I shouldn't think they'd do that," said Kay, though the same thought had crossed her mind. Sitting down again, she fell to studying her visitor. "Well, if you and I are going to be neighbours, Miss Fuller, don't you think we might as well get to know a certain amount about one another? Suppose you tell me about your work? How did you get into it. What made you take to that sort of thing?"

"Oh," said Pamela with a shrug of her shoulders and still listening to the whispering in the room next door, "it's not in the least what I ever wanted to do. I meant

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originally to be a teacher. Unfortunately I had a nervous breakdown just when I ought to have been taking my degree, so it didn't come off. Then after the breakdown I got an attack of religion and thought of going into a retreat of some sort. Yes, really——" She laughed abruptly. "That's the kind of person I am."

"Hadn't you any family?"

"Only a much older sister, married to a twerp. Their chief worry in life is to keep me off their hands and at the same time on the straight and narrow. They managed to get me a job with some horrible little spoilt rich brats. I used to want to strangle them but only had flaming rows with their loathesome mother instead and walked out with just two pounds saved up and no self-confidence. I got an attack of politics after that." She threw the stub of her cigarette on to the hearth without bothering to put it out. "Financially I managed on typing, waiting in cafés, helping out in sales and sponging on my friends. I'm an awkward character, as I dare say you're shrewd enough to realise." She waited, as if for a comment.

But as Kay said nothing, Pamela continued: "The fact is, I've no stability and no persistence. Quite soon I got fed up with politics and started to want a steady job, and an acquaintance from the religious phase got me the thing I'm in now. But I'm as fed up with that already as I was with any of the other things I tried. I hate charity. It makes you hard and callous, unless perhaps you're something very big, which I'm not. It makes you stop caring about people, you stop giving a damn for them as individuals. You only think of them in terms of their formal rights to the particular fund you're administering. It's thoroughly corrupting, at any rate to the giver. Your mind gets suspicious, and if you catch out one of those poor bloody people getting a little more than they've an

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absolute right to you feel clever and praiseworthy. It's as if——" She broke off. In the room next door there had been a sound of footsteps. Now there was a knock at the door.

Opening it, Kay found one of the gas-fitters on the landing. Behind him was the open door of Pamela's room. Through it Kay could see the second man standing near the fireplace. It struck her that the faces of both men had very strange expressions upon them.

Afterwards she thought it odd that she should remember anything about their expressions, for there was something much stranger than his face about the man who stood in the doorway. He happened to be pointing a revolver straight at her stomach.

II

SHE HEARD PAMELA YELP BEHIND HER.

In a sinister tone the gas-man said : " This 'ere revolver is going straight to the police."

" But that sounds an excellent thing to do with it ! " said Kay, relaxing.

" Me and my mate," said the man, " have been talking it over, and we're taking this 'ere revolver straight to the police."

Pamela came forward. " What's happened ? Where did you find it ? " she asked excitedly.

" Under the floor, miss—that's where we found it," said the man.

" What—in my room ? "

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"That's right, miss. And we've talked it over, me and my mate and we're taking it straight to the police."

"In *my* room?" Pamela repeated incredulously.

"Come and see for yourselves," he suggested.

After a swift exchange of glances, Kay and Pamela followed him across the landing into the other bed-sitting-room.

It was a smaller room than Kay's, with only one window looking out over a jigsaw puzzle of backyards. Kay had never been able to understand why, since the houses seen from the street were uniform, the yards at the back should all be different shapes and sizes. They looked as if great ingenuity had been needed to fit them together, while the walls between them, built of soiled, yellowish brick and extensively utilized by the cats of the neighbourhood for the usual cattish purposes, were all of different heights. On moving into Little Carberry Street Kay had nearly chosen this room, which had been empty, instead of her own, because the bathroom of the divided flat went with it; but Melissa Ivory had offered her the use of her bathroom on the floor below, so, since the room was darkish and Kay had not cared for those backyards, she had taken the bigger, lighter room overlooking the street.

Pamela's possessions were still in a surprising state of confusion. For all her practical air, she seemed to be the sort of person who can easily take a month to settle into one room. The disorder was increased by an unattached gas-fire, standing crookedly across the hearth, and by a number of tools and lengths of piping. Also there was a large hole gaping in the floor at the side of the fireplace. The second gas-fitter was standing over it, staring down into it with an air of excited perplexity.

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"There," said the man with the revolver, "that's where we found it." Using the revolver to point with, he showed them a spot near the grate. It was just the spot where he and his mate had obviously been intending to put the gas-tap. "And it was wrapped up in this." He picked up from a chair a blue and white check duster.

Kay took the duster and examined it. It was stiff with dressing, as if it had never been washed, and except for one or two smears of sooty dirt, it seemed to be quite clean. As she handed it back to the man she remarked: "Probably you oughtn't to have unwrapped it. For all you know, there may have been fingerprints on the revolver which you've gone and smeared."

"Good heavens, you don't mean the thing's been *used*?" cried Pamela.

"In case you don't know it," said Kay, "the criminal statistics of this neighbourhood are remarkably high. And as I was just telling you, this flat hasn't always had such classy tenants as you and me and Naomi Smith."

"Naomi Smith?"

"The girl who had this room before you."

The gas-man was sniffing doubtfully at the barrel of the revolver.

"It ain't been used recently," he said. "If a gun's been used recently you can always smell the gunpowder. This 'ere gun don't smell of nothing in particular."

"Is it loaded?" asked Kay.

"Well," he replied uncertainly, "I ain't no expert, and I don't much care about monkeying around with a lethal weapon as I don't wholly understand, but it seems to me as it's loaded all right. And it seems to me"—he squinted down at the small, ugly thing in his hand—"it seems to me as one bullet's missing."

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"And me and my mate," said the other man, joining in with what Kay was coming to think of as the Gas-men's Chorus, "have been talking it over, and we're going to take it straight to the police."

"I'm sure that's the best thing you can possibly do with it," she said.

But Pamela Fuller had a different opinion. She had been standing there with her head thrust forward and her face paler than usual so that the freckles stood out like a sprinkling of little brown pebbles on a slope of white sand. At this point she burst out: "This happens to be my room, and I consider the revolver is my responsibility!"

There was a noticeable little silence.

As the men stared at her, she went on: "I think it's definitely *my* job to hand the revolver over to the police—or to its proper owner if we can find him. But in either case it's I who ought to handle the matter."

Her tone was confident. Too confident, thought Kay, for surely she must have realised that she had not the faintest chance of getting the revolver away from the two men. Things like this did not happen to them every day. Moreover, calm as Pamela tried to sound, there was a note of desperation in her words, and the two men caught it.

One of them laughed and the sound was not very pleasant. "Not likely," he said, "this 'ere goes straight to the police, and me and my mate are going to see that it does, see? None of us knows who it belongs to—all we do know is, it was hidden mighty careful, and that, if you ask me my opinion on the subject, doesn't look too good. So we ain't taking no risks, are we, 'Arry?"

'Arry said no, they bloody well weren't.

Pamela took a belligerent step forward. "Your attitude

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is absolutely inadmissible, it's quite 'incorrect," she said harshly. "It's unquestionably I who am responsible——"

"Sorry, lady," the man cut in impatiently. "Like I said, we ain't taking no chances. Not that we've got anything against you, and if you care to come along to the police-station with us, so much the better, that's what I say."

'Arry immediately said he said so too.

Pamela tried to speak soothingly. "I do realise," she said, "that you think you're doing your duty, and I don't want to cast any doubt whatever on the integrity of your motives, but I assure you that as that weapon's been found on premises rented by me, the matter is one which is primarily my concern."

"Only if this 'ere belongs to you and you got a licence to keep it. I suppose"—the man looked at her hard—"it ain't yours by any chance?"

"Oh no," said Pamela, "no, of course it's not mine."

Kay took her by the arm. "Come along," she said, "the whole thing's nothing to do with us. Let's go back next door."

"But this is my room——"

"Come along," said Kay. She drew Pamela, protesting, out on to the landing. "Can't you see they wouldn't have handed the thing over at any price? And they were beginning to look at you in a pretty queer way. They'll probably make up quite a colourful yarn for the police about the way you wanted to hang on to the revolver instead of handing it over."

"But they had no right to take that line," said Pamela angrily. "The business really is my responsibility."

"No doubt, but why make a fuss about it?"

Pamela dropped into the armchair and glared sullenly before her. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, I

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know I'm a fool, a silly, hysterical fool, behaving like that, making that silly sort of ineffective scene. . . . That's just the sort of thing you'd never do, isn't it, Mrs. Bryant? Well, I'm always doing it, I'm always making a fool of myself. And I can see you despise me for it, because I can see you're the sort of person who always does the balanced, reasonable, appropriate thing. And now"—she gave Kay a smile, a curious smile with a blending of malice and friendliness in it—"could you spare another of your cigarettes? As you get to know me better, you'll find I'm always cadging cigarettes off my unfortunate acquaintances."

Kay handed her the cigarettes, taking one herself and sitting down on the divan, leaning back against the cushions. Neither of them spoke for a minute or two. Then Pamela said: "What a damned thing to happen anyway. Why couldn't they find it in your room—or anyone's but mine?"

"What's specially wrong with your room?" asked Kay.

In the room next door the two men had started walking about and a moment later they slammed the door behind them and tramped downstairs.

"Oh, it'll come out anyway, so I suppose I may as well tell you," said Pamela. "You see, I was once one of the more active members of the Communist party—and I don't mean one of your Bloomsbury belles with loose hair and loose morals and a smattering of Marx. I mean I was really in it, up to the neck. And the police knew all about me. Once I got followed home from a meeting and next day a man in a bowler hat turned up and asked my landlady a lot of questions about me. When I was telephoning I used to hear clicks on the line—I suppose you know what that means? And once my room was ransacked. It was done to look like a petty robbery, but I knew better.

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I tell you, the police didn't care for me at all—I was really in bad with them. And then—well, it's the way things always happen with me—I just got fed up with it all. I got fed up with the catchwords, and the gullibility of the people, and their lack of mental honesty. I think my historical memory was a little too good to let me stay a good Comrade for long. So here I am now, treading the path of respectability, doling out minute sums of money to German Jews, and I'm trusted by churchwardens and the sort of titled ladies who like to run funds to rescue the victims of other people's oppression. And I hate it all just as much as I ever got to hate the meetings and parades and slogans, but at any rate it's a steady income and that's something I've come to appreciate in my old age. And the police seem to have forgotten all about me. At least, I thought they had until. . . . Oh, of course I've been living in a fool's paradise. Because, thinking it over, Mrs. Bryant, I shouldn't be at all surprised if that revolver was put there on purpose. It's the police again, up to their tricks. I believe it was put there—planted there ! ”

Kay burst out laughing.

It was tactless of her, for Pamela had been in deadly earnest. Her light brown eyes went angry and hard.

“Oh, so you think it sounds improbable, do you? Well, let me tell you,” she said, “you've obviously no idea of the things that go on. Why, I could give you instances. . . . But of course you wouldn't believe them either. You people who live your comfortable, artistic, bourgeois life, pretending to be very free and progressive, you've no idea whatever of the sort of things that go on.”

“I don't expect we have,” said Kay, “but still I really

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can't manage to believe that the police ever bothered themselves so very much about you. I should think those clicks you used to hear on the telephone may have been a bad connection, and the ransacking of your room probably was done by a thief, because if the police had done it they'd have been professional about it and you'd never have known they'd done anything. And I'm dead sure they didn't plant that revolver on you."

"Then who did?"

"Nobody, of course. You hadn't taken the room or even been heard of in this house when it was hidden."

"You mean to think the revolver belonged to that woman—what did you say her name was?—who had the room before me?"

"Naomi Smith."

"Is that what you think?"

Kay shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know any more about it than you do. Further—and I'm glad of the fact—it isn't my business."

Pamela leant her head back. The smoke came dribbling past the dangling cigarette.

"This Naomi Smith," she said, "how well did you know her?"

"Not very well," said Kay.

"Yet you lived pretty close on top of one another."

"Yes, but she was very shy, or else actually didn't like company. We used to talk a bit. Sometimes she came in here for coffee. She was always quite friendly, but she never spoke about herself. I gathered she was trying to write novels. She liked to talk literature and art and psychology. She struck me as rather sentimental and simple and frightened of people."

"And yet you think the revolver was hers."

"I've said I haven't the slightest idea."

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There was a pause. In the street outside a barrel-organ started to play. Some children immediately picked up the tune, bawling it out shrilly and inaccurately.

"Where is she now?" asked Pamela.

"I don't know precisely—somewhere in France, I think," said Kay. "I know she put her furniture in store and asked me to forward her letters as soon as she sent me an address. She said she'd write to me as soon as she got settled."

"And she hasn't written?"

"No."

Pamela stood up, letting ash spray over the hearthrug.

"Well, I think the whole thing's pretty peculiar, yet you seem to think it ought to be treated as an everyday occurrence," she said. "Or is it that you're a bit like Naomi Smith yourself, that's to say, afraid of giving yourself away to other people? That's what I always feel about you, you know, when I look at those sketches of yours. They always have a tricky sort of design but there's never any feeling in them, they don't say anything, they don't give anything away. However, don't think I'm setting up to be an art critic—I dare say they're pretty good really." She wandered towards the door. "Anyway, thanks for letting me park myself here, Mrs. Bryant. I'll do as much for you sometime." She let herself out.

In the street the barrel-organ changed its tune and the voices of the children, following it, came up to the window in shrill cockney gusts. Kay fixed her gaze on one of her own drawings, pinned up on the wall, then after a moment got up, flung up a window and threw down a couple of pennies.

She started wondering again what she should do about the lack of a fire and the impossibility of cooking any food. In the end she decided to go to Jill Ackroyd's party. Jill

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had rung up about it three days before, and Kay, regarding herself as not much good at parties, had said she was still feeling shaky from 'flu. But Jill would at least have a fire. Looking at her watch and deciding that it was not too early to dress, Kay started downstairs to inquire from Ted Hay or Melissa Ivory if it would suit their convenience if she took over their bathroom for a while.

She found Ted Hay sitting at his typewriter. Ted was a thin young man with a pale face, large teeth and a stoop. He was one of the people who live in a hand-to-mouth fashion on the edge of the world of journalism, and, as such people do, knew the inside dirt on everyone who dwelt in that spiritual universe situated between Fleet Street and the Bolivar. He knew who was going to lose what job, and for what discreditable reason; he knew who else would get the job and also who ought to have had it; he knew who was going to marry whose wife; he knew who was homosexual. Kay had met him first some years ago when he had just come down from Cambridge. His horizons had broadened greatly since those days, when he had had the inside dope only on Shakespeare and William Blake. From living for a year in the flat above his, Kay had learnt that before eleven o'clock in the morning he was a dangerous savage, but that once the pubs were open he could be counted upon to develop a friendly interest in others and a vague, gossiping urbanity.

He was pounding away at his typewriter now with an air of nervous resentment. Spread out on the table before him were the remains of a meal which looked like breakfast, with sheets of typescript poking their corners into the butter and marmalade. The saucer of an empty coffee-cup at his elbow was swimming in a muddy fluid composed of spilt coffee, sodden cigarette-ends and ash. Ted himself, who had obviously not yet thought of shaving, was

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wearing a polo sweater, flannel trousers and a dressing-gown.

Looking up at Kay, he muttered: "Hullo, ducks, come in. I ought just to finish this, if you don't mind. . . ." And for an instant a finger hovered over the keyboard. But then, as if really he were relieved at the interruption, he pushed his chair back and groped for a cigarette. "I'm trying to do five hundred words on Dank's new book," he said, "and as I'm not permitted to use a single one of those that spring spontaneously to my mind, I'm finding it no little effort. Well, how are you? You've got a kind of peaked look. Anything the matter?"

"I'm chilled to the bone," said Kay. "Miss Fuller's new fire is half in and half out and my gas is disconnected."

"Poor ducks, come up and get warm then." Ted stood up and wandered across to the fire. "The Fuller person was telling me all about her gas-fire just a short while ago. She was so uppish about having won a round against Miss Lingard that I told her Melissa was only an inch off victory in getting the groundfloor woman turned out. What d'you make of the young person, by the way? Difficult, I thought myself—volcanic."

Pulling a small armchair as close to the fire as it would go, Kay sat down with her feet on the fender. The fire was a mass of glowing coal banked up behind curved bars in a handsome old fireplace.

"We had a minor adventure up there this afternoon," she said, and told the story of the discovery of the revolver.

"Really, really, ducks," said Ted when she had finished, speaking with a touch of disapproval as if he did not quite believe her. But Kay knew that it was life itself that roused his incredulity; he seemed always to suffer from a sense of the utter improbability of most things that actually happened. Taking hold of several of his features

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in one hand, he pulled them about in an agitated fashion. "The things you do get yourself mixed up in," he said. "I always thought there was more in that Naomi Smith than met the eye. She was too quiet to be real. She impressed Melissa enormously because she seemed so virtuous—Melissa, poor girl, couldn't understand that—but I always had my suspicions."

"Then you think the revolver must have been hers?"

"I should think so."

The warmth from the fire was beginning to spread through Kay. She settled herself more comfortably.

Ted continued: "It's an intriguing situation really. Consider—if a person hides a revolver under the floor and then moves out, leaving it behind, what does it suggest? That she's forgotten it, you say. And what does that mean? Myself, I see something deliberately discarded, buried. Possibly a crime. More probably an intended crime, a fantasy of a crime. I shouldn't be at all surprised if that Naomi person, who was certainly very repressed, not to say actually a bit queer in her way, even if she did impress Melissa—you see, Melissa's so moved by the sober and chaste, she simply can't understand them, poor lamb, she finds them very strange and wonderful and slightly terrifying, and never understands how utterly terrifying she is herself to most people. . . . By the way, what was I saying? I seem to be just waffling on in my usual way."

"The revolver," said Kay.

"Ah yes," said Ted. "Well, I just mean to say that I shouldn't be at all surprised if our Miss Smith had some nasty crime, or more probably some criminal fantasy, doing perfectly horrid things to her unconscious."

Kay, smiling suddenly, made a quiet reply.

Ted said amiably: "Really, really, the words you girls

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do use nowadays." Picking up the tongs, he added a few more lumps of coal to the fire. "Anyway," he said, "you wait and see. In an apocalyptic age such as the one we happen to be living in, the most commonplace people start acting in very, very peculiar ways."

Still toasting herself comfortably, Kay remarked: "What I really came down for was to ask if I can have the bathroom."

Ted waved his hand towards it. "Any time. I promised Melissa I'd have a bath sometime to-day but I can't seem to get around to it. By the way, I was telling you about her and Miss Lingard, wasn't I? My own opinion is, there's nothing in it, but the girl goes on hoping. She's got the persistence of the tide on the shore and every time she meets Miss Lingard she tries to wear down the old granite a bit more. Miss Lingard's made a strategical retreat; she's taken refuge behind that mythical uncle of hers, Mr. Roote. Mr. Roote, she confided in Melissa yesterday, is a very peculiar gentleman, very odd and peculiar indeed. He has his whims and he has his ways. Myself, I think Mr. Roote's whims and ways will probably beat Melissa, though the girl's incapable of recognising defeat when she sees it."

Standing up, Kay opened her bag and extracted some pennies for the gas-meter in the bathroom. "Ted——" She hesitated. "About that revolver, d'you think it's going to lead to a lot of inquiries?"

"I shouldn't think so. Why should it?"

"Pamela Fuller seemed to think that it would. Did I tell you about that. She tried to make the men hand the revolver over to her. She seemed to think it might actually have been planted on her by the police, trying to make trouble for her because of her old connection with the C.P."

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"Did she now? How some of those young things do dramatise themselves, don't they?" But a sound of uneasiness, as if the thought of a police inquiry had only just entered his head, had crept into his voice. He started clawing his features about again, and as Kay went through to the bathroom she heard him muttering to himself.

The bath, as in Pamela Fuller's tiny flat, was in the kitchen. This probably caused less inconvenience to Ted and Melissa than it would have to most people, since they seldom cooked anything there but coffee and eggs and bacon. A dresser, covered with crockery, took up one wall. Brooms, an ironing-board and a pair of skis were stacked in one corner. A string, stretched from wall to wall above the bath, usually carried an array of damp stockings, camiknickers and blouses. Packets of butter, bottles of milk, jars of bath-salts and half loaves of bread stood about in odd places. A small Breughel print hung from a tack driven into the panelling just above the soap-dish.

Kay put three pennies into the meter and lit the geyser. She took her time over her bath. When she came out of the bathroom she found Melissa had come home. She was walking up and down the sitting-room, wearing her fur coat and one of her sophisticated hats and a black dress of striking cut which she had bought, so she had once told Kay, for three guineas from the very high-class second-hand shop where she bought most of her clothes. She was tall and dark, with warm colouring and sharp handsome, arrogant features. Her manner, Kay had once thought, was haughty and casual, but as soon as she had got used to it, she had realised that the most striking thing about it was a sort of shyness, a constant bewildered uncertainty and self-distrust. Melissa was studying child-

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psychology and went out every day to work at a clinic in the East End ; Kay assumed it was really the problem of her own mentality that she was hoping to elucidate by this indirect method.

There was a moment of silence when Kay came into the sitting-room. Ted and Melissa stared at her absently, as if they were both intensely occupied with something else. Then Melissa abruptly started offering her tea. Melissa often had odd attacks of formal courtesy and on this occasion she succeeded in making the invitation sound as if Kay were the vicar's wife, paying an afternoon call. She started apologising for the fact that Ted had not yet cleared away the breakfast.

"A disgusting sight," she said unhappily, "and isn't Ted a disgusting sight too? Look at him. It isn't just that he hasn't shaved—I don't mind about that, because it must be so horrible shaving. But he hasn't washed. D'you know, Kay, I have to *drive* him into having a bath? Did you have to do that with Patrick? It's rather odd, I always think, not liking baths, but Ted simply hates them, they seem to make him absolutely miserable. And the thing that's really rather odder still is, he seems to think one can't tell when he hasn't had one."

A growl from Ted stopped her. He observed to Kay : "I've just told Melissa about the revolver and the Fuller person."

"It must have been marvellously exciting," said Melissa enthusiastically, but she seemed to be restless and went on fidgeting about the room. "Ted thinks the revolver must have belonged to Miss Smith. I shouldn't have thought so myself, but he's got ever such convincing psychological reasons for it—they sound simply marvellous. But still, I shouldn't have thought so. I should have thought the tenants who were there before her were

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more the sort of people who'd be likely to keep fire-arms under the floor."

"No, ducks—in their hip-pockets or under their arm-pits," said Ted with authority. "The important point is that the sort of person who keeps a revolver under the floor doesn't expect to have much use for it."

"But after all, Miss Smith was such a superior person, wasn't she?" said Melissa. "She was much too superior for a slum like this. That's what I told Miss Lingard. I warned her that if she didn't turn out the ground-floor people all her really superior tenants like Miss Smith would leave. And she did leave. And now there's this queer thing about the revolver. What do you think, Kay? Do you think the revolver was hers? I mean," she went on, "suppose it hadn't actually been found, would you ever have guessed at her having such a thing? Would it ever have occurred to you that Miss Smith was the sort of person who'd keep a revolver under the floor?"

"No," said Kay, "but I never expect people to be quite as fantastic as they often turn out to be."

"Oh—why not?" said Melissa. But as Kay had no answer ready for this searching question, Melissa returned to her former line of inquiry. "Do you mean that you'd actually have decided that Miss Smith *hadn't* got a revolver under the floor?"

"No, I just shouldn't have thought about it," said Kay.

"Why not?" asked Melissa again, very earnestly.

Again Kay had no answer ready.

Melissa gave a sigh and observed: "Isn't probability extraordinary?" She seemed quite unaware of any leap of thought between this remark and her last one. "It never seems to work out in ordinary life, only in mathematics. I suppose that's what you really mean."

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Ted suddenly scraped his chair back.

"Before we hear the last of it," he said, "we're going to be cursing Miss Smith and her revolver to hell!" And with a few more muttered curses, he disappeared into the bedroom.

Melissa looked put out by the suddenness of it. She turned to Kay with an apologetic smile and said: "It's perfectly true, it's a whole fortnight."

"What's a whole fortnight?" asked Kay, puzzled.

"Since he had a bath, of course," said Melissa, looking astonished that Kay could imagine her mind was on any other subject.

III

KAY WENT TO JILL ACKROYD'S PARTY. BUT SHE WAS not in the mood for it and came away early; it was only ten o'clock when she reached home once more. The night was moonlit and still and the streets were fairly quiet. From the doorways of pubs came a warm hubbub of voices, but neither pubs nor cinemas were emptying yet and on the pavements there was only a sprinkling of people. A surprising number of these were young children. To Kay those thin-faced, fierce-eyed children, wandering the streets at night, had always been the most disturbing sight of the neighbourhood.

As she turned into Little Carberry Street she saw light streaming out from the doorway of Number Ten. Before she reached it two people emerged and hurried off down the street. One was a man, the other a woman, showily

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dressed. Both kept close to the area railings as if to dodge any light that might fall from the street lamps. Kay assumed they were two of the people to whom Mrs. Flower extended the amenities of her flat.

Mrs. Flower herself was in the hall, idly gazing at the letter-rack, when Kay let herself in. She was a thin, nervous-looking woman of about thirty-three with frowsily unkempt, bleached hair, a pasty skin and a sour, curiously prim expression. When she was at home she usually wore glasses and looked oddly like a schoolmistress gone to seed. But she always faced the outer world with a swimming, myopic stare. That evening she was dressed in a soiled pink dressing-gown and feathered mules. She gave Kay one of her hard, unsmiling looks and Kay had a feeling for an instant that she was on the verge of speaking to her, but instead she turned back to the letter-rack, and Kay went on upstairs and almost immediately went to bed.

For a while she read, then she tried to sleep, but she was not successful. She heard Pamela come in and go to bed, she heard the "Blue Pigeon" turn its customers out into the street, she heard the usual rough voices, the shouted good-nights, the odd bursts of cheerful singing, and then she heard the street grow quiet again with only some thin strains of dance music from wireless sets in houses nearby standing out above the soft, unintermittent hum of London traffic. When at last she did manage to sleep, she was wakened again, so it seemed to her, almost at once.

The sound that wakened her was, she thought for a moment, her alarm-clock, and reaching out her hand, she fumbled for the knob that stopped the ringing. But when she had found it and pressed it, the ringing went on as before. It took a little while for her to rouse herself sufficiently to recognise that the room was still dark, the

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only light in it coming from a dim reflection of the street lamps far below. There was no trace of daylight in the sky. Groping again for the clock she held it so that what little light there was fell across its face and managed to make out that the time was ten minutes to three. The ringing continued.

As soon as she was properly awake she knew, of course, what the matter was. It was Charlie Boyce, the tenant of the first-floor flat. He must have forgotten his key again and wanted to be let in. Swearing to herself, Kay started to get out of bed, then changed her mind, lay back, closed her eyes, and as the maddening sound went on, declared to herself that that night was to be the night when she would prove to Charlie Boyce that she was capable of refusing to open her window and throw down her key.

She had warned him the last time it had happened ; in clear and simple words she had told him that she would never do it for him again. "Next time," she had said, "you'd better try waking somebody else up or spend the night on the Embankment !" And so that he could have no possible cause of grievance against her, she had added that he need not think she did not mean it.

Lying there, gritting her teeth and feeling the sort of murderous, primitive rage that can grip a normally restrained individual only in the middle of the night, in the darkness, when sleep has just been broken, she started repeating to herself what she had said to him. "... on the Embankment . . . on the Embankment . . . he can damned well sleep on the Embankment ! And I hope he dies of cold !" The ringing presently developed a sort of tune, a staccato rhythm. Elaborating her unkind thoughts, Kay treated herself to a fantasy of flinging up the window and throwing down, not her key but her

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bowl of daffodils, aimed carefully at Charlie Boyce's head.

At last, after a couple of minutes, the noise stopped and Kay breathed victoriously. But almost immediately the ringing began again; Charlie had paused, apparently, only to change hands. He was, of course, enjoying himself. Kay soon began to recognise the rhythm of the tune he was playing: "Awake, my soul! . . ."

No, thought Kay, not the daffodils, not just a small, harmless bowl of daffodils. . . .

Suddenly a furious voice called out from the next room: "Who the hell's got the bloody nerve to be doing that?"

Kay called back: "Charlie Boyce."

"That Fascist!"

The accusation, in the circumstances, struck Kay as so odd that for a moment her rage transformed itself into a giggle. It was amusing to discover that anyone could believe that Charlie Boyce possessed convictions of any kind.

"I didn't know he was actually a Fascist," she said, "but I'm delighted to learn anything against him."

"He's a frightful man," Pamela called out. "I know all sorts of things about him."

"Good—sometime you must tell me."

"Anyway, why's he doing it—waking us all up, I mean? Why's he making that filthy row?"

"He's forgotten his latch-key."

"Just the kind of thing that class of person always does!"

Ring, ring, ring. . . .

"Well, why not do something about it?" Pamela called impatiently. "Your room's over the street—why don't you throw your own key down or something?"

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"I told him last time I'd never do it again," said Kay.

"Why, has he done it before?"

Kay's answer was a bitter laugh.

"But he sounds as if he means to keep that ringing up all night!" Pamela called desperately.

"He probably does," said Kay.

"Good heavens! . . ." Pamela was silent for a little, thinking it over.

That was the moment Charlie chose to give an extra long peal on the bell, then to start playing a new tune. Kay did not manage to identify it straight away.

"But look here"—Pamela's voice sounded very peevish—"he can't just go on, keeping us awake for hours."

"He can, unless you can think of a way of stopping him," said Kay.

"Perhaps—considering everything—throwing your key down. . . ."

"The same thing would happen in about three evenings' time, and again three evenings after that. I've had lots of experience."

"But, Mrs. Bryant, I've got to go to work in the morning!"

" 'The Keys of Heaven,' " muttered Kay.

"What did you say?"

"The tune he's playing—it's 'The Keys of Heaven.'"

"Oh, Mrs. Bryant, for the Lord's sake!" begged Pamela. "I simply can't stand it! I've got to get up at seven and do a day's work. Do please throw your key down. Tell him what you think of him, by all means, and count on me to help, but do please make him stop that noise!"

Finding she was beginning to feel almost as angry with Pamela as she was with Charlie Boyce, Kay said nothing.

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Pamela changed her note ; she said aggrievedly : " Anyway, it's rather hard on him really, refusing to let him in. He may not have much money with him, he may have nowhere to go. Even if he is what I know he is—well, I wouldn't grudge the meanest animal on earth a night's shelter. And if he didn't wake us up, he'd have to wake somebody else up, wouldn't he ? It's really pretty selfish of us, I think, not to answer. You do seem to be a pretty coldblooded creature."

" Oh hell ! " Kay grunted, giving in abruptly. Jumping out of bed, she grabbed her dressing-gown and threw open the window.

As soon as Charlie heard the noise of the window opening, the ringing stopped and he stood back from the doorway. As Kay thrust her head out he raised a hand in greeting and she could see that he was grinning. The key tinkled on the pavement. Kay slammed the window shut and got back into bed.

A few minutes later she heard Charlie's step on the staircase and his soft tap on the door.

" I've brought you your key back, Kay," he said. His tone was quiet, gentle and conciliatory.

" Go away and leave me in peace ! " Kay snarled back.

" But your key——"

" Go away ! "

" But listen—I can't leave your key just lying around out here—it might get taken. And I'm liable to be asleep still to-morrow when you're wanting to go out."

Kay jumped out of bed again, floundered into her dressing-gown and wrenched the door open.

Charlie was standing just outside, waiting to give her his sweetest, slightly drunken smile. Yet he was not drunk. He never was. He only acted as if he were

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when he thought it would help him out of a difficult situation. When Kay held out her hand for the key he smiled more beautifully than ever and with a world of tenderness in his voice, murmured: "Hullo, Kay."

"The key," she said.

"How sweet you look—but how annoyed, oh Lord, how annoyed!" He swayed slightly on his feet. "You're not really annoyed, are you, Kay? You couldn't be, you're too kind, too sweet."

The look that beamed in his eye was as angelic as that of a spoiled and cunning child, trying to appease a dangerously angry adult. Yet Charlie Boyce was no child; he was thirty-four. He was an architect, employed by a firm with offices in Doughty Street, and though Kay had had no opportunity of judging whether or not he had any ability, she had realised that he was extremely hard-working and extremely ambitious. Sometimes he wrote articles on housing for that most sober of progressive Conservative weeklies, the *Critic*, and Kay thought it was probably these that had drawn on him Pamela's accusation of Fascism; Kay herself believed they were nothing but an effort at self-advertisement. He was a smallish, gracefully shaped man with a haggard pale face, thick black hair and delicately arched black eyebrows, and was, Kay admitted, very handsome. He dressed conventionally and well and was always contemptuous and faintly offended at any untidiness or singularity in others.

Usually when returning Kay's key after waking her up, he tried to keep her talking for as long as possible. Tonight, propping a shoulder against the doorpost, he said to her: "You know, Kay, there's something I don't understand—to be more exact, there's something about you I don't understand. Shall I tell you about it? I don't understand——"

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"Nobody," Kay interrupted, "understands everything about anybody, but they manage all right. Now give me that key, please."

"But I was going to tell you——"

"The key."

He gave a sigh, drew the key out of his pocket and dropped it into her hand.

"There," he said. "And now at least let me tell you that I'm deeply grateful to you for letting me in. I simply can't say how grateful I am. It's sweet, the way you always take pity on me. And you do it so sweetly too. You're always so awfully sweet. . . . And that's what I was going to say just now, I was going to say, I simply can't understand how that husband of yours could let anyone as sweet as you walk out on him. What a damned fool he must have been."

Kay replied: "I'm too tired to appreciate irony." Stepping back, she began to shut the door. But Charlie's shoulder, propped against the doorpost, was in the way. She burst out irritably: "For the Lord's sake, will you get out and leave me in peace! And let me warn you about something I intend to do from now on. Every evening I'm going to pack some paper into the bell. So next time you forget your key and start ringing at three in the morning, you can go on and on and play all the tunes you can think of, and I shan't be in the least annoyed, because I shan't have heard a thing."

"You are so sweet, Kay," Charlie answered smiling, "you really are."

"Are you going?"

"Do I ever refuse your pressing invitations to go? But it isn't actually late, you know, and I do enjoy these talks of ours, Kay. There's something special in them, there's something in them I never get from anybody else."

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I always look forward to them. D'you know, while I'm coming home all by myself, feeling pretty low sometimes, sort of used up and finished, I start thinking of talking to you. I start thinking what an extraordinary bit of luck it is that I've forgotten my key, because—you may think this is pretty odd, but it just shows the scrupulous type of person I am—if I hadn't really forgotten my key, I'd never have the nerve to start ringing your bell, however desperately I wanted to talk to you. It is pretty odd, isn't it, if you come to think of it?"

"If ever I thought you'd wakened me like this without having actually forgotten your key," said Kay through clenched teeth, "I should be liable to slit your throat from ear to ear!"

"Well, I swear I've never done it yet, Kay, and if I ever do,"—he grinned—"I'll take care you never know anything about it, so you needn't worry. Now goodnight and a thousand thanks." He turned to the stairs.

"Oh, Charlie——"

He halted.

"How well," Kay asked him, "did you know Naomi Smith?"

For a moment Charlie said nothing. But out of his brilliant black eyes he gave a curiously searching stare.

Then he asked: "Why?"

"Just that something queer's happened."

"What?"

"But *did* you know anything about her?"

"Not very much. She was quite a nice young thing, quiet, cautious, not very interesting. I gave her a drink once or twice." Then, still watching her eyes with that fixed intentness, he repeated: "Why?"

Kay told him about the finding of the revolver.

He gave a chuckle. "That's a nice story." The

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intent look had gone again and he was smiling. "And you think the revolver was Naomi's?"

"I don't know. Ted thinks so."

"I'd say it wasn't. But in any case——"

The door behind him was wrenched open.

"Just how long are you two going to go on jabbering away out here, keeping everyone awake?" Pamela demanded furiously.

Charlie turned with a stare of surprise. As he studied Pamela, whose short thickset figure was wrapped in what was obviously a man's striped woollen dressing-gown, somewhat too large for her, a cold and antagonistic look appeared on his face. He always seemed to resent contact with any woman who did not attract him. Giving her a bow, he said in a tone of aloof apology: "I beg your pardon—I do most earnestly beg your pardon, madam."

Pamela's pale eyes glared. "Is he tight?" she asked Kay.

"Not really," Kay replied.

"Then why does he behave in this outrageous fashion?"

"It's just the peculiar mentality of the animal. I've been warning him that in future I shall pack the bell with paper every night, then if he starts ringing it at three in the morning we shan't be able to hear it."

Charlie shook his head as if he were sorrowing, for her own sake, over Kay's lack of charity. "I can't really believe it," he said. "Women capable of packing bells with paper belong in some category outside my experience—and I think they'd better stay there." He turned again to the stairs. But for an instant, before he went, his glance went back to Pamela's sour face, and suddenly leaning forward, putting his face close to hers, he said "Boo!" Then he kissed the tip of her nose.

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Pamela gave a horrified yelp.

Charlie, with dignity, departed downstairs.

Pamela exclaimed : " He must be tight ! "

She looked at Kay as if it were all her fault, went into her room and slammed the door. Kay went back into her own room.

Starting to get back into bed, she realised that she was too completely awake to be able to sleep, and looking around for her cigarettes, smoked three before she turned the light out. Even then she slept only fitfully, waking to wonder fretfully why her nature should be constructed that someone like Charlie Boyce, who in many ways reminded her so strongly of her husband Patrick, only who was, she was inclined to think, if anything even more egotistical and morally irresponsible, should attract her as much as he did. For he did attract her, he attracted her very much. There was something about his quick movements, his vividness, his nervous vitality . . .

Solemnly she swore to herself that she really would pack the bell with paper every evening. She would do it without fail, she would be ruthless, pitiless. . . .

IV

KAY WAS AT BREAKFAST THE NEXT MORNING WHEN Detective-Inspector Cory arrived. Sitting shivering at the table in her dressing-gown, she was trying to make up for the lack of a fire by pretending that the small, pale patch of sunshine falling through the window had warmth as well as brightness. The Inspector was a grave-looking

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man, youngish and good-looking in a ruddy, blunt-featured way. His fair, crisply waving hair was cut very short, his eyes were grey, frowning and earnest. He frowned a good deal at Kay all the time he was talking to her, making her feel that he thought that young women ought not to allow themselves to be caught at ten o'clock in the morning, having breakfast in their dressing-gowns. He frowned at her drawings too, pinned up on the wall, but this was in an absent-minded way as if he were not really looking at them.

He had with him a bulky, silent individual called Sergeant Whitehead. Once the Sergeant had seated himself in a corner of the room, he never opened his mouth except to give a slight cough now and then. Later Kay wondered if these gentle throat-clearings might not convey some meaning to Inspector Cory, for the Inspector looked just the sort of man who would possess an instinctive comprehension of dumb animals.

Looking up from a note-book, the Inspector began with a question: "You are Mrs. Bryant?"

"I am," said Kay. She added: "You don't mind if I go on with my breakfast?"

"Please do," he said gravely. He gave a quick glance round. "Is your husband away?"

"My husband doesn't live here."

"I asked the question," he explained formally, "merely because, if your husband had been here, I might have been able to save you some distress."

Kay hesitated, then asked: "Has something distressing happened?"

In his corner Sergeant Whitehead gave one of his coughs.

Glancing again at his note-book, Inspector Cory continued: "I think you were present yesterday, Mrs. Bryant,

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when a revolver was discovered under the floorboards on these premises by two employees of the gas company."

"I was in this room," said Kay. "The revolver was found next door."

"Thank you," said Inspector Cory. "The room next door is occupied by a Miss Fuller, I believe."

"It is."

"Was she present?"

"She was in here with me. But why are you asking—?"

He checked her. "So neither you nor Miss Fuller actually saw the revolver until the men showed it to you?"

"No. But talking of the two men and the gas, is there any chance, do you think," said Kay, "of their finishing off their job in the near future? Making all reasonable allowances for exciting things like revolvers, there's still something to be said for being able to light a fire."

Without any comment, the Inspector made a note in his note-book.

"Now, Mrs. Bryant," he went on, "how long have you lived here?"

"About a year," she replied.

"And how long has Miss Fuller lived here?"

"A week, exactly."

"You mean she moved in last Thursday?"

"No, I'm sorry, it was the Wednesday. I remember because it was the same day as I went out for the first time after an attack of 'flu."

"Are you well acquainted?"

"I've known her just the one week," she told him.

"I see—thank you. And now can you tell me her place of employment? I must get in touch with her as quickly as possible."

Kay gave him the name of the refugee committee for which Pamela worked. The Inspector made a jotting in

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his note-book, and after that paused thoughtfully until Sergeant Whitehead gave another gentle cough. The Inspector frowned faintly, then fixed his eyes on Kay.

"I believe the room next door was occupied until recently by a Miss Smith," he said questioningly.

"Yes," said Kay.

"Would you mind describing her to me?"

"What—her appearance, d'you mean?"

"Yes, her appearance."

"But why, Inspector?"

"It's a question of identification."

"Has something happened to her?"

"I don't know," he said. "We'll come to that presently. First I should like an accurate description of her as you're able to give me."

Kay picked up her cup and drank some coffee. Something in the Inspector's face gave her a queer stab of panic, yet when she thought about it, it only seemed earnest and troubled and not unkind.

"Well," she said uncertainly, "I'm not sure if I'm very good at verbal descriptions, but I'll do what I can. She was about my height, I think—five foot six, say. She was very slim. Her hair was brown with a reddish tinge and she wore it quite short, almost like a man except that the front part was much longer, with a deep wave in it. She usually wore silver ear-rings—"

"Ah——" said Cory suddenly. It sounded as if he had said it involuntarily and he added hurriedly: "Please go on."

"Her skin was very pale," said Kay, "and her eyes. . . ." She stopped and thought. "Her eyes were blue, I think."

"Can you think of anything else?" asked Cory. "Had she any distinguishing features? What about her teeth, for instance?"

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"Her teeth—yes, of course. There was a small gap between the two front ones. She dressed quietly and not really very well. With her colouring and her figure she could have carried off almost anything, but she generally wore——"

"What she wore," the Inspector interrupted her, and his tone was grim, "is unfortunately of no interest to us."

Kay noticed that her hand, which had been fingering her cup, had suddenly started shaking. "What's happened?" she asked sharply. "I think you ought to tell me."

"Please don't get excited, Mrs. Bryant," Cory answered evenly. "You're being very helpful, and there are still several questions I'd like to ask."

"I won't answer any more questions till you tell me what's happened!"

Tilting his chair back, Cory cocked an eyebrow at her, which made him look as if he were trying to soothe and cajole a child.

"Let's just get a few more things straightened out first," he suggested, "then I'll tell you everything I can."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, go on."

"Can you tell me anything of Miss Smith's family, her parents, her home address?"

"Very little," she answered. "She came from somewhere in Oxfordshire. She'd come to London to write, and I think there was some degree of rebellion against home influences about it. Certainly she always sounded as if she didn't care much for her family. I don't think she wrote to them often, if at all, and when she didn't get on with her writing here—couldn't live on it, anyway—I know she was very unhappy at the thought of letting them crow over her."

"Then you can't tell me her family's actual address?"

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"I'm afraid not."

"Not even the name of the town or village they lived in?"

She shook her head. "No . . . Wait a minute, though. I've just remembered, there's a letter addressed to her downstairs, tucked into the letter-rack. I promised to forward any letters that came as soon as she sent me an address. She said she was going to France, but I haven't heard anything yet. Perhaps that letter might be from someone in her family."

Turning to the silent sergeant in the corner, Cory told him to fetch the letter from the letter-rack.

When the sergeant opened the door they all heard a slithering sound outside it. With amazing swiftness Cory crossed the room, and thrusting past the sergeant, strode out on to the landing.

"Hi, you!" he shouted down the staircase.

Below on the half-landing a cringing figure halted and began a string of sullen, muttering excuses. It was Tovey, the caretaker, who lived in the basement in what appeared, through the area windows, to be a state of indescribable squalor. He was a thin, tall, dirty old man who shuffled around the house, making symbolic gestures of cleaning the stairs and landings, dressed always in bedroom slippers, a worn pair of black trousers, a collarless shirt and a waistcoat hanging open. He had a drooping black moustache, fierce furtive eyes and a scowl. He lived very quietly in his basement, going across to the "Blue Pigeon" every night for about half an hour, but even then hardly ever conversing with anyone. Now and then, it is true, he had a quarrel with Miss Lingard, and when that happened he abused her with unspeakable obscenity so loudly that the whole house could hear. After one of these outbursts Miss Lingard used to explain him to the

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tenants as "quite a character." Kay had never had any trouble with him, but had never liked the way he was always to be found outside a door or round a bend in the staircase whenever anything of interest had been happening.

Inspector Cory cut the caretaker's excuses short. "All right, all right, you were listening, and much good may it have done you!" He sounded angry and threatening, but Kay had a feeling that it was only done for show. "Now you're here you can answer a couple of questions. Were you eavesdropping up here yesterday afternoon?"

"No, sir—no, certainly not, sir. I wasn't up here at all yesterday afternoon. I done my cleaning in the morning." The old man's tone was humble but venomous. "I wasn't up here at all in the afternoon, sir."

"You're lying," said Cory.

"No, sir. I'm never up here in the afternoons, sir."

"So you don't know what happened up here in the afternoon?"

"No, sir, I don't know nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing, I said," said Tovey, his voice sharpening.

Cory glanced back over his shoulder. "Did you see him up here in the afternoon, Mrs. Bryant?"

"No," said Kay. But she might have added that one seldom saw or heard Tovey.

"Well, I'll talk to you later," said Cory, and giving a slight nod to Whitehead, who started down the stairs, the Inspector came back into the room and closed the door. "An interesting household you've got here, Mrs. Bryant," he remarked, standing straddled on the hearth-rug. "With some of it, as it happens, I'm not entirely unacquainted."

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"Don't tell me the police have anything against Tovey," said Kay.

"Not a thing," said Cory, "except maybe his face, and as to that, I've seen worse ones." He changed the subject: "You appear to be an artist, Mrs. Bryant."

"Of a sort," said Kay.

"I suppose that explains it then—I suppose you come here for atmosphere," he said questioningly. "Otherwise, if you don't mind my saying so, I'd be wondering what a young lady like you was doing in a place like this. But that's just a general observation, you know. I'm interested in people. I often wonder about why they act like they do."

"This place is cheap," said Kay. "That's really it's main attraction."

"Other places are cheap too—healthier places."

"Well then," she said, "it's central."

"I suppose," he said, eyeing her curiously, "several of the other people in this house are what you might call artistic—what you might call Bohemian."

"You might—if that word means more to you than it does to me."

He smiled. "What would you call them if you don't like my word?"

"I call them by their names. And now will you tell me, Inspector——" She had been growing so tense, sitting there waiting for him to have done with his questions, that now when she was trying to force an answer out of him, her voice cracked. "Will you please tell me *at once* what's happened to Naomi Smith?"

Inspector Cory drew a breath in slowly. He let it out again slowly. A look of sadness and of resignation appeared on his face. Suddenly Kay found herself thinking of the look she had seen once on the face of a doctor who

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had been about to tell her mother that she must have an operation involving a fair amount of danger and pain. With an air of cold reluctance that seemed almost hostile, Inspector Cory put a hand into his breast-pocket and drew out a black leather pocket-book.

"I hope you are able to take a shock," he observed formally, as, taking a photograph out of the pocket-book, he laid it down on the table in front of Kay. "Are you able to identify the woman in this photograph, Mrs. Bryant?"

Kay looked down at the picture. Instantly she looked away again and for a sickening moment she had the feeling that nothing in the world could make her look at that picture a second time. Then, steadying herself, she picked it up and studied it carefully.

"Yes," she said at length in a low voice, "that's Naomi Smith."

"You are sure—beyond question?"

"Absolutely sure?"

"You can see that she's . . .?"

"Yes, that she's dead."

Indeed, with such horrible mutilations and with the dark trickles of blood across cheeks and forehead, that face could scarcely have belonged to a living woman. And besides that there was something else. The dead look so defenceless, so humiliated.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Bryant," said Inspector Cory. "If she was a friend of yours, I should like to offer you my sympathy." He stretched out his hand for the photograph.

But Kay held on to it, staring at it as if she were fascinated.

"When did it happen?" she asked.

"Just over a fortnight ago—on Tuesday night. You may have read reports of it in the newspapers. The

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naked body of a young woman, considerably mutilated, was found on Hampstead Heath. There was no way to identify her and no one has come forward since to report the disappearance of anyone like her. She had been murdered—shot through the heart. The only clue of any sort on which we could proceed was a small silver earring on the ground near the body. And then, yesterday evening. . . .” He cleared his throat. “Yesterday,” he said, his tone still formal, half-apologetic yet half-hostile, “we discovered that the bullet that killed her had been shot from a revolver found under the floor of this house.”

V

KAY SAT THERE, SAYING NOTHING. SHE COULD NOT think of a single thing to say. She went on staring at the photograph. She had put it down on the table again and had folded her hands in her lap, squeezing them together so hard that they went white from the pressure. Inspector Cory showed himself considerate and waited.

Sooner or later she would have had to say something, but she was saved the effort by the sound of a shuffling step on the stairs. Thinking that it was Tovey back again, she called out: “Come in!” But it was Ted Hay who put his head into the room.

As his eyes, bleary as they always were at that hour of the morning, fell on Cory, Ted’s lanky form, dressed in pullover and flannels, halted abruptly, bent round the edge of the door, and mumbling an apology, he would have

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withdrawn, if Cory had not checked him, beckoning him to come in. Ted strayed forward uncertainly, and it was without his having received any warning that his sleep-sodden gaze fell on the photograph on the table.

What happened then reminded Kay of a story she had been told in her childhood. It was of a traveller who had been terrified in the midst of a dark forest by the appearance of spectre without any face. In the safety of the next inn he had confided the horrible experience to a sympathetic listener and the listener had responded by saying : "Was it like this?" and had wiped out his own face.

The instant Ted saw the photograph, he put up a hand, in that familiar gesture of his, to claw at a bunch of his features ; almost at once, however, he let the hand fall ; when he did so not a trace of expression was left on his face. There was nothing there, no thought, no feeling, but only a stunned look of shock, a greyish blankness. With his hands thrust down into the pockets of his dressing-gown, he slouched up to the table.

Kay held the photograph out to him.

"Christ, how horrible!" he croaked as he took it. "It's that girl, isn't it—that girl who used to live here?"

"Naomi Smith," said Cory. He took the photograph from Ted and returned it to his pocket-book. "You knew her?"

Ted nodded. From the look on his face, Kay was afraid he was thinking of being sick.

"She was murdered," Cory informed him laconically.

Ted's face twitched. "How?"

"Shot," said Cory.

Ted turned towards Kay, but before she could reply

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to his wildly questioning look, Cory went on: "Yes, Mr. Hay—with the revolver found yesterday on these premises."

That seemed to give Ted another shock. With a shaky hand he felt around for a chair.

"Go on, what's the rest of it, what happened?" he asked huskily.

Cory repeated what he had already told Kay of the finding of the body on Hampstead Heath and of how the discovery of the revolver had led to the identification of the unknown, naked corpse. But he added some details he had omitted before. He told them how, shortly before midnight, the body had been stumbled upon in the darkness by a young couple who had been out seeking privacy. Rushing out to the main road they had started shrieking for the police. They themselves came from Camden Town, and were a steady young couple, engaged to be married. Later it had been estimated that the dead woman had been shot round about eight or nine o'clock; that is to say she, had been dead for three or four hours when the body was found. It had been lying in a sandy depression among bushes. The police believed that the clothes had been removed and the face mutilated in order to conceal the woman's identity and that since the mutilations had not been sufficient to make the face unrecognisable, it was possible that the murderer had been frightened away from the place by a passer-by before the job had been completed; in the dusk it would have been easy for the murderer to slip away among the trees and knolls of the Heath.

Ted listened tensely. At the end he muttered: "Bad—worse—much worse than I expected."

His brows contracting nervously, he bent forward, staring at the floor. His cheeks still had a greyish pallor

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and he still looked as if he were considering the attractions of being sick.

Inspector Cory resumed his questioning: "Did you know Miss Smith well, Mr. Hay?"

"Not particularly," Ted muttered.

"I think that's the answer you'll get from everyone in the house," said Kay.

"Then someone," said Cory, "will be lying."

"How d'you make that out?"

"Someone in this house murdered her, didn't they?"

"*Did* they?"

Ted cut in: "Is murder necessarily a proof of intimacy, Inspector?" From his voice he sounded as if he were beginning to recover himself.

"Well," said Cory carefully, "perhaps I didn't express myself very well. Perhaps the murderer didn't actually know the young woman intimately, didn't know about her tastes and her interests and her habits and all that. But she must have been of the greatest importance to him—unless, of course, he's a maniac of some sort, which is never altogether out of the question."

"Wait a minute," said Kay. "You still haven't said how you know it's someone in the house who did the murder."

Cory looked as if he thought she were being stupid.

"Because, Mrs. Bryant, the revolver was found in this house."

"But why should that prove it?"

"Well, isn't it what you might call strong presumptive evidence?"

"You mean because it would have been difficult for an outsider to put it there under the floor?"

"Exactly."

With her chin cupped in her hands, Kay thought it over.

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After a moment she gave a shake of her head. "No, it could easily have been someone from outside."

Ted backed her up eagerly: "Of course it could. Anyone can get in here who likes. There's always a lot of coming and going. Nobody'd ever dream of questioning anyone they happened to see wandering up and down the staircase here. For one thing, it could so easily be indiscreet."

A trifle impatiently Cory said: "Quite so, I admit a stranger could have got in. And since we're on the subject, have you actually noticed anyone on the stairs or in the room next door whom you couldn't account for? I take it, Mrs. Bryant, that you're in this room a good deal?"

"Yes," said Kay, "I'm sometimes here all day."

"And have you heard anybody in the next room?"

"Lots of people," said Kay.

Cory showed swift interest. "Yes?" he prompted.

"I've heard dozens of people," said Kay. "I've heard Miss Lingard. I've heard all the people who came to look at the room and didn't take it. Sometimes Miss Lingard came with them but sometimes she'd just given them the key so that they could look round by themselves. I've heard the decorators——"

"Just a moment," said Cory quickly, "decorators. The room's just been painted, has it?"

"Yes, Miss Lingard had it re-done for Miss Fuller."

"Clever wench, if she can squeeze paint out of that stone," said Ted. "Melissa's never managed it."

"And just when were the decorators in?" asked Cory.

Kay considered. "At the beginning of last week, I think," she said. "The Monday and Tuesday."

"Did you hear any noise of hammering on those days?"

"Not that I remember."

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"Who did the painting?"

"I don't know. Miss Lingard could tell you."

Beginning to pull his face about again, Ted interrupted: "Hammering? Why hammering? Can't one get a board up quietly if one wants to? Does one have to hammer it?"

"I don't know how it was got up," Cory said drily, "but it had been replaced with three-inch nails, and to get three-inch nails home, hammering is usually necessary."

"Three-inch nails—my God!" said Ted. The information seemed to impress him. "Three-inch nails! Nothing gimcrack about that, is there? Some individuals really seem to be incapable of doing a shoddy bit of work. Three-inch nails! Only"—his voice went agitated—"what a bloody complicated way to get rid of a gun. I could think of a dozen less elaborate, less strenuous ones."

"As, for instance?"

But it was just then that Sergeant Whitehead reappeared, holding the letter addressed to Naomi Smith.

Taking it, Cory glanced at the handwriting and the postmark on the envelope, then he slit it open. The letter inside was a short one; reading it swiftly, he returned it to the envelope and put the envelope into his pocket-book. For a moment it looked as if he did not intend to make any comment on the letter. With his big square hands resting on his knees, he stared frowningly before him. There were deep lines of thought across his ruddy forehead. At length he stood up.

"Miss Smith came from the village of Redstock, near Oxford," he said. Then briefly, as if he were thinking of something else, he thanked Kay and Ted for answering the questions he had put to them, asked them where he could find them should he need to speak to them again later that day, looked hard at a drawing of Kay's on the

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wall, shook his head at it slightly and went out. The sergeant followed him. It all happened so abruptly that Kay and Ted were left looking at one another with surprised, almost aggrieved expressions on their faces, both faintly resenting so brusque an interruption of what was, after all, an intensely interesting conversation.

"Reminds one of the Red Queen," said Ted. "'At the end of five I shall go. . . .'"

"Only he didn't even give us that much warning." Getting up and furling her dressing-gown around her, Kay started walking up and down. She realised that she was shivering. "Ted, what kind of person could Naomi have been so important to that she'd—that she'd got to be killed?" she asked.

"You—me—God knows," he replied.

"I suppose we're all under suspicion."

"Certainly, ducks."

"And there'll be lots more questioning, and there'll be reporters, and we'll be watched and interfered with."

"And that," Ted burst out with one of his attacks of peevish violence, "is the very thing I realised the moment I saw that photograph, and if you can afford that kind of thing, I can't—Melissa and I can't! So long as it was just a revolver under the floor that might have been there God knows how long, it wasn't so bad, but now that it's murder . . .!"

Kay stood still. "I hadn't thought of that—I mean about you and Melissa."

"Everything'll come out," he said darkly, "and just at the moment we can't afford it."

"Actually not afford it—that's to say, financially?"

"That and every other way. If that savage, aristocratic mother of Melissa's finds out about her living here with me, our lives won't be worth living."

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Kay nodded thoughtfully. "And of course that's why you were so extraordinarily shaken when you saw the picture."

"Well, at least partly, though you must admit it wasn't exactly a pretty picture, was it?"

"And I thought that perhaps . . ."

"Perhaps what?"

"That you must have known Naomi rather better than you'd let anyone know."

Ted looked at her queerly. "Did you indeed, ducks?"

She gave an uncertain laugh. "I wonder how many people in this house are going to face the unveiling of their private lives with equanimity," she said. "There's you and Melissa, living your dark life of sin; there's Miss Fuller with her political past that she's so uneasy about; there's Charlie Boyce, whose whole existence, it wouldn't surprise me to learn, is made up of one unmentionable crime after another; there's Tovey——"

"If it turns out that that snooping rat's a blackmailer and extortioner," snarled Ted, "it'll be no surprise to *me*!"

"Then there's Miss Lingard," said Kay.

"Who's obviously in Tovey's clutches, or she'd never stand the way he goes for her."

"Unless it's just a queer streak of kindheartedness in her make-up."

"In that block of granite?"

"And then there's her mysterious uncle, the peculiar Mr. Roote," said Kay, "whose existence will probably be proved or disproved if there's a police inquiry. That'll be something interesting to know, at any rate."

"And then there's you, ducks."

There was a short silence. "Yes," said Kay, "there's me."

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"Is there anything in your life that won't stand the light of day?" Ted asked sympathetically.

She laughed. "You know," she said, "I shouldn't be surprised if Mrs. Flower turns out to be the only one who doesn't give a damn about having police all over the place. Her relations with them must be on some quite comfortably established footing by now. Anyway"—she had sat down at the table again and had picked up a pencil and was fiddling with it—"I suppose he *is* right, that man Cory—it must have been someone in this house. I didn't think so at first, I didn't want to, but after all, I think it may have been one of us."

"Probably, though it's true all sorts of people get in. Take the ground-floor clients, for instance. And during those two days when the decorators were in and out the door downstairs was standing open half the time and absolutely anyone could have got in. However"—Ted gave a sigh—"I admit the odds are on an inside job. Those three-inch nails clinch it. No outsider in his senses would have risked staying long enough to do the job with three-inch nails. Getting them out in the first place must have taken a bit of doing. But still, as I was saying before, even if it was one of us living here who wanted to get rid of the gun, what a fantastically dangerous and complicated way to do it. If I'd had a gun to get rid of I'd have thrown it in the river—or the Whitestone Pond would have come in handy on the Heath. Or I'd have buried it in the sand on the Heath, or made a parcel of it and left it in a Left Luggage Office, or I'd have planted it on somebody else. I shouldn't have gone taking up floor-boards and hammering them down again with three-inch nails."

"Those nails seem to stick in your throat."

"Well, I'm said to have swallowed one in my infancy

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and nearly died of it. Still, you see what I mean, ducks? If it's an odd enough way for someone living in the house to dispose of the weapon, it'd be too bloody odd for words for someone who didn't belong here."

Absentmindedly Kay poured out another cup of coffee, found it cold and muddy from grounds from the bottom of the jug and pushed it aside.

"Well, I hope that policeman remembers about getting the gas turned on," she said. "He made a note of it in his little book."

"Come downstairs when you want to get warm," said Ted hospitably. He stood up and ambled over to the door. "Mind you ducks," he went on, "I *can* think of a reason why a person might not want to throw their revolver into the Whitestone Pond or leave it in a Left Luggage Office, and why they might prefer to bring it back with them after the murder and hide it under a floorboard in an empty room—only it isn't at all a pretty reason."

"Well?" said Kay.

"Well," said Ted, "they might have feelings against wasting a perfectly good revolver."

"In other words . . ."

"In other words," said Ted, "they might be intending to use it a second time." And suddenly looking intensely alarmed, as if his own words had scared him more than he had expected before he spoke them, Ted turned quickly and disappeared.

VI

KAY HAD MORE VISITORS THAT MORNING.

First came the two men from the gas-company. Both were solemnly excited and when their work was done they lingered on to enjoy a discussion with Kay on the subject of murder in general. She was startled by the quantity of information that they both possessed; their memory for gruesome detail was almost scholarly. Once they slipped into controversy as to whether it was the right leg or the left of the aunt's corpse that had been dug up in the town councillor's back-garden in the Stoke Poges murder, but on the whole they agreed and corroborated one another's statements. However, they differed about the best method of getting rid of a body, and when at last, to Kay's relief, they tramped off downstairs, they were arguing learnedly about the various advantages of boiling, bashing and burning with acid as a means of preventing identification.

Kay's next visitor, heralded by a sharp tapping of high heels on the stairs and a peremptory knock on the door, arrived while she was in the kitchen, celebrating the ability to use her cooker again by making another jug of coffee. It was at that point that Kay abandoned as hopelessly unrealistic the thought that in spite of the discovery of a murder she might get a little work done that day. Reluctantly she opened the door.

Outside was Miss Lingard. She came in briskly and made the remark she always made on coming into Kay's room: "You *have* made this place charming, my dear. I'd never have thought one of these dreadful old rooms

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could be made to look so sweet. I do envy you, dear, I really do, being so clever."

Her voice was as smooth as it always was, but her eyes, instead of roaming inquisitively around as they usually did, dwelt searchingly on Kay's face.

They were hard black eyes, observant and unrevealing. Their lids were heavy and pouchy and under the coating of powder that clung to the shrivelled skin, looked as if they were made of some thick, white *crêpe*. There were bright triangles of rouge on Miss Lingard's cheeks, there were beads of mascara on her lashes, there was a tint of raspberry on her narrow, firmly closing lips and there was rich henna on her hair; but she was dressed shabbily and carelessly. Her bottle-green coat was at least five years old and her black patent shoes had been so stretched by wear that her heels came half out of them at each step she took. She was a short woman with narrow shoulders, a bony chest and bony, brittle-looking wrists and ankles. She did not actually live at Number Ten, but in a house further down Little Carberry Street, where she shared a flat with her invisible uncle, Mr. Roote.

Sitting down, she took the cup of coffee Kay offered her and said: "Well, I must say, this *is* nice of you, dear. I like a nice cup of coffee half-way through the morning."

Her eyes as she spoke travelled slowly downwards from Kay's face to her feet, almost as if she were studying Kay's navy blue suit with a view to copying it. Yet although Miss Lingard always looked other women over in that way, she never appeared in anything but her old bottle-green coat.

"I do hope I'm not interrupting you," she went on. "I'm ever so sorry about the gas being cut off all yesterday evening, but these things will happen, won't they? You have to take the rough with the smooth. That's what

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I'm always telling people—you have to take things the way they come or you'd just never get through life at all."

Kay decided they might as well cut the preliminaries.

"I suppose you've seen Inspector Cory," she said.

"I have—and I'm ever so sorry about that too, Mrs. Bryant, my dear," said Miss Lingard. "I'm ever so sorry that a nice girl like you should find yourself mixed up in a horrible affair like this. I don't worry about the others. They're different, all the others are, but you're a nice girl with a decent, respectable way of living; you're the sort of tenant I'd like to have in all my flats if Little Carberry Street was different from what it is. But there, what's the good of wishing? You can't remake the world, can you? That's what I always say. Only I do think it's a shame that a really nice, respectable girl like you should find herself mixed up in all this trouble."

Kay might have been more impressed by this speech if she had not known that, in conversation with Melissa, Miss Lingard had cast the gravest doubts on Kay's moral character. "Sugar?" she suggested.

"Thanks, I don't mind," said Miss Lingard, and helped herself genteelly. "That Miss Smith now—you'd never have thought it of her, would you? She seemed ever such a quiet little thing. She always used to say to me, 'Good morning, Miss Lingard,' in ever such a nice way, and I used to say to myself, well, I used to say, Number Ten is going up in the world now with two nice girls like that living there. Soon, I said, I'll be getting a bit choosey and not taking just anyone who comes and wants a room, like that Joe-the-Chicago-Bull who used to live in the basement—was he before your time? An all-in wrestler, my dear. Not that there was anything wrong with him really; I must say in fairness he was a very

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nice-natured, good-tempered man. And dead sober always, that's the absolute truth. But just having him there used to make the other tenants feel nervous. I dare say they used to wonder what would happen if he did get drunk one day. Oh, I can tell you, my dear, a landlady's life isn't a bed of roses, anyway not in a dreadful district like this. Still, so long as one has to put up with things the way they are, well, I say to myself, what's the good of complaining? But all the same, I never did think, I really never did, that Miss Smith was one to go and get herself murdered."

While she was speaking Miss Lingard's hard little eyes, finished with Kay's clothes, had returned to her face. It was as if she were keeping a careful watch on the effect of her words. Kay wondered if she had come to see her with some definite aim in view or was merely feeling her way, hoping to pick up some fragments of information. It struck Kay that when Miss Lingard spoke of Naomi Smith a note of undisguised venom had come into her voice, and it was still there as, leaning forward confidentially, Miss Lingard continued: "Because don't tell me, my dear, that a person goes and gets herself murdered unless she's done a few things that most of us don't know anything about. Don't tell me that if she'd really lived her life in the open like most of us she'd be lying there stiff and stark with bullets in her. Because when murder happens there's usually faults on both sides, that's what I think. It stands to reason. This is the way I argue; if she hadn't been hiding all sorts of things about herself, then we'd know, just as well as she probably did herself at the last moment, who shot her and why. But we don't, do we? And so I say, there you are, it just shows. She looked so nice and quiet and well-behaved, and all the time she was up to something we

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don't know anything about. As I say, it just shows." She ended on a note of queer satisfaction.

One phrase she had used stuck in Kay's mind. "... as well as she probably did herself at the last moment" Kay had not thought of that. It had not occurred to her that Naomi must have known who her murderer was and for an instant at least must have known that she was about to be murdered. For an instant she must have known all that is to be known of the terror of death.

Kay stood up restlessly. Then she could not think why she had stood up and sat down again.

A vision of Naomi, slim, chestnut-haired and pale, facing her murderer, stayed in her mind. Yet it was a strangely indefinite vision; it was featureless and vague. Naomi Smith had been so shy and withdrawn, so cautious of revealing herself to others, that it was beyond the power of Kay's imagination to create a Naomi standing there in the abandonment and utter self-revelation of fear and despair.

Since Miss Lingard seemed to be waiting for her to say something, Kay murmured: "Well, we don't really know much about anyone, do we?"

Immediately she had said it she had the feeling that she had somehow played right into Miss Lingard's hand.

"Ah," the little woman said eagerly, "that's just what I say! I always say"—she jerked her chair a couple of inches forward—"what can you ever know about anybody? You can know people for years and not know the first thing about them really. Take me and my tenants, for instance—what do any of us know about one another? As I always say to my uncle, Mr. Roote—isn't it strange, I say to him, there are all those people at Number Ten, I see them all ever so often and we're always the best of friends, but what do I know about any of them really?"

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Even you now, Mrs. Bryant. . . . Here we are, sitting drinking your lovely coffee and having a nice talk, but do we know one another? What I mean to say is, *know*?" The shrewd little eyes bored into Kay's in strangely intense inquiry. "*Do we?*"

"Why no, Miss Lingard, of course we don't," said Kay.

"Mind you," said Miss Lingard, "with me it's partly done on purpose. I don't believe in letting myself get too friendly with any of the tenants because I believe in being exactly the same to all of them. Not that I don't regret it sometimes, but you see what I mean, dear—I couldn't help liking some of them better than others, and when I feel a thing I can't help showing it; that's what I'm like. I've never, all my life, been able to conceal my feelings. My uncle, Mr. Roote, tells me I'm quite right. You're quite right, Gladys, he says to me, you mustn't ever make any differences between them, you must be fair and business-like and not interfere in their private concerns. Above all, he says, you must never listen to gossip. And that's what I think myself. If a tenant pays the rent regularly and keeps the place decent and clean and doesn't make a noise, that's all I care about. I never listen to gossip." She leant forward again, a shrunken little figure, taut as wire, and in a hissing whisper repeated: "*I never listen to gossip!*"

Kay gave a smile; she had begun to see where all this was tending.

"I'm sure that's wise of you," she said. "And I'm quite sure that the police will understand that you don't know anything about any of us. They're such very understanding people, the police, so I've been told."

Miss Lingard was not one to miss a note of irony in a voice but she could overlook it when she chose. "You really think so, dear?" she said.

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"Oh yes," said Kay, "they'll see you couldn't possibly have known any more about the private life of Naomi Smith than, say, of—Mrs. Flower's."

She smiled again at the way Miss Lingard rose to the bait.

"Well, if that isn't just what I was going to say myself!" Miss Lingard bobbed up and down on her chair so excitedly that some coffee slopped into her saucer. "That Mrs. Flower. . . . Well, of course I do know that she isn't exactly a nice woman—I mean, she's not refined or educated or perhaps as careful as she should be about the company she keeps. But what I say is, it takes all sorts to make a world, and I don't actually know anything against her, because, you see, I never listen to gossip. Never. Why, if I listened to everything I heard. . . . But there, you wouldn't be interested in all that, would you, dear? Besides, I dare say you've heard most of it already. Miss Ivory's always spreading the most scandalous stories about everyone. The things she says about that poor Mrs. Flower! And who's she, after all, to say such things? I tell her sometimes she'll get into trouble if she goes about saying dreadful things like that about people. But she's so uppish, she wouldn't dream of listening. And then, even supposing some of the things are true, or partly true, which I've no way of judging as I don't believe in spying on people or interfering in their private concerns—well, still, as I say to my uncle, Mr. Roote, which of us, I say, is above criticism? You do see what I mean, don't you, dear?"

"I'm sure I see exactly what you mean," said Kay.

"Not that I say I wouldn't have asked Mrs. Flower to leave if the matter had been entirely in my hands," Miss Lingard said with another sigh, "because I'll admit she isn't quite the class of tenant I like. But after all, one

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mustn't hold that against her, must one? And as Mr. Roote says, live and let live, because if we don't, where shall we all be? He's ever so good-hearted, Mr. Roote is. And then too he's a bit—well, funny. Not queer, you know—I don't mean that—or even what you'd call odd exactly, but just a bit—well, funny. So it's no good arguing with him and trying to get him to change his mind, not the least bit of good, I assure you."

"All the same," said Kay, "I shouldn't really be surprised if it turns out that the police know all that they need to know about Mrs. Flower and that they'll run her in just when it happens to suit them."

"Now that," said Miss Lingard, "is the sort of talk I don't like to hear." But a cunning smile flashed across her face. "In any case, I know nothing about her, nothing at all, and that's what I shall tell the police, and it's what I hope you'll tell them too, dear, if by any chance they should make any remarks on the subject."

Kay saw no need to answer. The purpose of Miss Lingard's visit was now laid bare. Yet Kay was feeling more and more uneasy. Had she believed that Miss Lingard was a stupid woman she might have found the whole scene comic. But she did not believe Miss Lingard was a stupid woman. She believed Miss Lingard understood precisely what effect she was producing, and that she was doing it on purpose; that this personality of hers, which she assumed in all her dealings with her tenants, was a piece of deliberate clowning; that, moreover, Miss Lingard did not mind in the least if this fact were perceived. Somewhere at the back of all the ingratiating chatter was a clever, tortuous mind, driven by motives of which Kay had not the faintest comprehension.

Kay was still hesitating, thinking it might be wise to give Miss Lingard some sort of vague assurance, when,

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without any preliminary warning of footsteps on the stairs, a heavy knock sounded on the door. There had been so many knocks on Kay's door that morning that as she went to open it she found herself muttering: "Oh, for the Lord's sake, can't they ever let me alone?"

On the landing was Tovey the caretaker.

Shuffling a couple of steps forward with his black waistcoat hanging open, showing a bulge of blue and white striped shirt, he held out a grimy hand in the palm of which was coiled a short string of pearls.

"These yours, ain't they?" he grunted to Miss Lingard. "Found 'em on the stairs, reckoned you must've dropped 'em."

"Oh, thank you, Tovey!" she exclaimed with a beaming smile. "How very kind of you. Tovey's always so careful and so thorough," she added to Kay, "so reliable, so completely honest. I really don't know what in the world I'd do without——" She stopped. She had held out on hand for the pearls while the other hand had gone automatically to her throat. Her string of Woolworth pearls was securely clasped around it. "No, these aren't mine, I've got mine," she said. "They must be somebody else's."

"Thought they looked like yours," the caretaker growled sourly.

"Well, they do, of course, and it was very kind of you, Tovey." Miss Lingard seemed anxious not to offend him. "But look, I've got mine. Where did you find them?"

"On the stairs, I told you."

"Perhaps they're yours, Mrs. Bryant?"

"No," said Kay, "I haven't got any."

"Then they may be Miss Ivory's or Miss Fuller's."

"Well, I've handed 'em over to you, you've got 'em,

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you can do what you likes with 'em," said Tovey, and scowling at Miss Lingard as if she had just done him some deep personal injury, he slouched out of the room.

Miss Lingard looked at the necklace uncertainly, then said: "Perhaps you wouldn't mind asking Miss Ivory or Miss Fuller if it belongs to them, would you, dear? I'm ever so rushed to-day and I don't know when I'll get around to seeing them."

Agreeing, Kay took the necklace from Miss Lingard and let it curl into a little heap on the mantelpiece.

"Thanks ever so," Miss Lingard said. "He is a one, old Tovey, isn't he? He's got such a temper, you never know when he'll go off half-cocked. But it's just like I said, he's absolutely honest. He wouldn't keep back a penny he picked up; anything he finds he brings it straight to me. It's wonderful really, if you come to think of it, in a poor old man like that. Some people don't appreciate honesty like they should, they don't know what it is to have temptations. You've never had any trouble with him, have you, dear—with that temper of his, I mean?"

"No," said Kay, "we've got along all right so far."

"Good," said Miss Lingard. "You see, I'm quite fond of the poor old thing. He was in the war, you know, and he was wounded, and he's had trouble with his poor old head ever since. That's why I like to keep him on. There aren't really many jobs he could do, not really hard jobs, you know, so a place like this just suits him. But of course he's a character, and you have to be interested in characters, like I am, to appreciate him." She set down her coffee-cup and rose. "That war," she said, "that war! And now they say we're going to have another and I don't suppose that'll be the last one either. Well"—she gave a bitter little cackle of laughter—"they

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can't do anything much to me. I'm too old for things to matter. I lost all I had to lose in the last one."

Something in the tone of the words startled Kay. She had never expected to hear from the posturing little woman that note of sardonic sincerity. Miss Lingard apparently saw her surprise, for her eyes glinted mockingly.

"Oh, that surprises you does it?" she said. Her smooth voice had turned harsh. "You wouldn't have thought I'd ever had anything to lose, would you? Well, I did. I had a man, just like a lot of other people, and we'd have been married some day, only he was one of the ones that didn't get back, and so I didn't get married, and I didn't have a home of my own or anyone to look after me, and I've had to fend for myself all my life and I've done it any way I could and never cared who criticised. And that's the way I'll go on, making my living as I can, not interfering and not taking any interference from anybody!"

Striding rapidly across the room, she went out, slamming the door behind her.

A moment later she had opened it again and thrust her head in.

"Never take any notice if I talk like that, dear," she said. The familiar smile was back on her face. "All of us have our troubles and with me it's just my nerves. Mr. Roote says to me, Gladys, he says, one day if you aren't careful you'll get yourself into trouble with your nerves, you should do something about them. Nerves, he says, are all stomach, and what you want to do is do something about your stomach. So don't you ever take any notice of me, dear, if I talk like that."

The smile stretched itself further across the painted little mask of a face, then the head disappeared. Click, click, went Miss Lingard's high-heeled, ill-fitting shoes as she descended the uncarpeted staircase.

VII

WHEN THE SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS HAD FADED, KAY slipped into a coat and hurried downstairs herself. The whole house seemed unusually quiet, except that in the ground-floor flat Mrs. Flower and a man were shouting furiously at one another. Kay took the precaution of treading very softly, for someone, she felt uneasily, was almost certain to pounce out on her before she got away. A solitary lunch, free from landladies, caretakers, policemen or co-tenants seemed at that moment the most desirable thing she could think of. She reached the street without encountering anyone.

Nevertheless she had gone only a few steps when Charlie Boyce appeared beside her.

"Hullo," he said, "going out to lunch?"

"Yes," she replied without warmth.

"So am I," he said, "but let's have a drink first. I could do with one and you look as if you could do with one too. Murders undoubtedly do take it out of one."

"I was thinking——" Kay began.

But Charlie, taking her arm, started to steer her across the street.

"Not the 'Pigeon,' d'you think?" he said. "We may run into people there. This is the time for a nice quiet drink and some nice soothing conversation. Let's go to the 'Lion.'"

"Everyone in the place seems to have been trying to have nice soothing conversations with me this morning," grumbled Kay, "Unfortunately it doesn't leave me feeling nice or soothed."

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"Well, we'll see what some whisky will do for you. I suppose you saw that policeman this morning?"

"Inspector Cory? Yes." Kay had just noticed that Charlie's hair had not been combed, or else had been having a rough time with nervous fingers. With Charlie, she thought, that signified that he was feeling badly shaken. "Have you seen him too?"

"Oh yes, the Inspector's putting in a very busy day," said Charlie.

"He was rather kind about it on the whole, I thought," she said.

"Oh yes, he was kind all right—he was so ineffably kind, as a matter of fact," said Charlie, "that I almost unburdened myself on the spot and confessed to the murder—or if not to the murder exactly, at least to all the other crimes on my conscience. There's a little matter of some books, for instance, that I've never returned to the London Library. There are the times I've not been asked for my bus-fare and slipped off the bus without paying. There's some income-tax I've never paid and which somehow, I haven't the least idea how, I seem to have got away with. Oh Lord yes, he was kind. But let me remind you, Kay, those stolid, red-faced, good-natured, kind people can be much cleverer than they look, and the probability is that one who's managed to become a Detective Inspector will turn out to be as cunning as hell."

"Won't that be to our advantage?"

Charlie gave her a grim look. "Please" he said, "don't start parading that air of utter innocence or I'll find myself eaten up inside with suspicion of you. I'm feeling so guilty myself at the moment after my half-hour's chat with your kind policeman, that I couldn't bear to sit and talk with anyone who thought they had

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to act as if they'd never done anything wrong in their lives."

"The talk " said Kay, "was your idea."

"All right," said Charlie, "it was. All the same, let's admit that half an hour's talk with any policeman makes one feel guilty whatever one has or hasn't done. The mere fact that the man himself obviously thinks one's probably guilty——"

"Does he?"

"Well, if I were a policeman myself I should work on the assumption that each person as I talked to him was the one I was after." Charlie pushed open the swing-doors of the "Lion." "It's the opposite of the law and should work pretty well as a complementary principle. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. . . . What'll you have, Kay—Scotch?"

"Please, but without any dialectics; the obscurity's black enough already." Kay perched herself on a high stool at the end of the bar.

There was no one else in the place except an old woman drinking gin and gazing vacantly into space with red-rimmed, watering eyes. As Charlie ordered the drinks and slid them along the counter Kay noticed that his eyes too were red-rimmed. The haggardly handsome type, she thought, does not really look at its best in the mornings. But coming face to face with herself in a large flyblown mirror, massively framed in mahogany, that covered most of one wall, she decided that she was not at her best either. Under her smoothly brushed dark hair her face showed strain; it was pale and tired; her lipstick looked too bright against it.

Sighing, she leant her elbows on the counter and her head on her hands. Charlie, gulping down his whisky, patted her on the shoulder.

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"Come on, drink up, there's a good girl," he said, "you'll soon feel better."

"I feel quite all right, thank you, except than I'm just a bit sleepy from being woken at three in the morning by a lot of damned bell-ringing," Kay replied.

"That isn't what we came here to talk about." Charlie sat down on the stool beside her, and as Kay had just done, met his own face in the mirror. For a moment he glowered at it with a look of intense dislike, then turned away from it. "Kay," he said, "did that—that girl mean anything to you?"

"Naomi?" She hesitated. "Yesterday I'd have answered no, nothing whatever. But now . . ."

"I know," said Charlie, "that's the way it's got me too."

"It's the horror of it, the sheer brutality and horror. And that picture. I can't forget it."

Charlie pushed his glass back for some more whisky. "I suppose it does have to be one of us at Number Ten," he said. "Yet these things do sometimes happen out of the blue. She wasn't a bad-looking girl and she was ignorant as hell and that's a good combination for trouble. I can easily imagine her, for instance, picking up strangers and trying to make them tell her the story of their lives, all for her very own serious literary purposes. She'd have had no suspicion of it if she'd happened to walk into something dangerous. Still, I know there's the revolver. Someone killed her with it and then brought it back and hid it in her room, and much as I'd like to believe it, I don't think a stranger would have troubled to do that—though it's a pretty queer thing for anyone to have done, even someone living in the house. There'd have been so many easier ways of hiding it."

"That's what Ted said," said Kay.

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"Still," said Charlie, "somebody did bring it back and somebody did hide it. And I'd like to know——" His voice dropped suddenly. "Kay, who do you think did it?"

As she met his eyes, fixed in brooding inquiry on her face, it suddenly occurred to Kay that until this morning she had hardly ever seen Charlie except when he was playing the fool. She knew nothing about him, practically nothing. She knew that he had good looks and intelligence and considerable selfishness, but apart from that, what sort of man was he? Lifting her glass, she drank thoughtfully and forgot about answering his question.

In a low voice he prompted her: "Go on—you must have decided who you think did it."

"I don't know anything about it," she answered firmly.

"No, but you'll have jumped to a conclusion all the same. You'll have a feeling you know who it was—you must have."

"Why, have you?"

"Of course."

"Then you say first—who was it?"

"It was ——" He broke off. "Oh, all right—of course one can't really say that sort of thing. Suspicions are things one ought to keep to oneself, particularly when they arise out of anything as fallible as one's own judgment of character. But all the same, if only once—*once*, mind you, Kay—you showed you could give yourself away as most other people do now and then, in fact if you showed you could be indiscreet and damned stupid and trustful as almost everyone is at some moment of their life, then I believe I'd really fall in love with you instead of just playing with the idea."

In the pause that followed Kay had that strange, deceptive feeling that comes to most people at some time or

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other that she knew exactly what was to come next. It was a feeling that all of this had happened before, that she had sat here in the bar of the "Lion" with Charlie Boyce and had heard him say those precise words. They were, she thought, pretty foolish words to say to anybody. However, as she lifted her glass and as some whisky went down her throat, she realised that actually she had not the faintest idea what was coming next, of what she herself was about to say.

She must have let more time go by than she realised, for with some uncertainty in his tone, Charlie asked suddenly: "Kay, what are you thinking about?"

Her glass, as she put it down, made a louder noise than usual on the polished counter.

"I was just wondering," she replied, "what *you* were doing on that Tuesday evening, Charlie?"

A look of blank surprise appeared on his face. That changed to a look that Kay did not understand, but she thought it might be anger. Then he gave a shout of laughter.

"So it's me you suspect!"

"No!" Her cheeks flamed. "I didn't mean that!"

"Didn't you," he said, "oh, didn't you just!"

"I didn't. As a matter of fact," she tried to excuse herself, "I was just thinking that that's a question the police are sure to start asking us soon, and I'm not at all sure if I can remember what I was doing. It'd probably be best for us both to start thinking it out."

Charlie went on laughing at her. "I'd forgotten you're the woman who stuffs bells with paper," he said.

"Stop it," she said, "I said I didn't mean it. And anyway, what *were* you doing that evening, Charlie?"

He considered. "What the hell *was* I doing?" And he fell into frowning thought.

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Kay started to remember precisely what she herself had done on that Tuesday when Naomi Smith had been murdered. Usually on Tuesdays she went to see Madge Elders, the art-editress of *Home Sweet Home*, an old friend who had been very helpful to Kay at the time of her break with Patrick; they had a standing arrangement to lunch together on Tuesdays. Yes, thought Kay, they had lunched together that day and they had talked until nearly three o'clock when Madge had suddenly jumped up and fled back to her office, while Kay, feeling one of her distracting headaches coming on, had gone to a chemist, bought some aspirin, swallowed two on the spot, and then, hoping that the headache would pass off, had gone into a cinema. But when she came out again the headache had been worse, she had had a dry throat and a hot, heavy sensation in her body. After some tea in a Lyons—by then, she supposed, it must have been about six or six-thirty—she had decided to try the effect of a short walk and had turned down towards the Embankment. . . .

"I know," said Charlie at that point. He said it glumly. "I know what I did that night."

Kay remarked: "I was in bed. I've just worked out that that was the evening I went down with 'flu. I simply came home round about seven o'clock and went to bed."

"Did anyone see you?"

"Not that I remember."

"Good," said Charlie. "That's satisfactory. My own alibi's so inconclusive that if other people's are rather that way too it'll make me feel a lot better."

"That," said Kay, "isn't nice of you."

"But reasonable. You see, I went to about three different parties that evening, and unluckily everyone at all three was fairly tight and so I imagine there isn't the

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faintest chance that anyone will be able to corroborate in a reliable sort of way when I arrived and when I left. And what may make things really rather unpleasant is that one of those parties was in a flat just off Haverstock Hill, which is right in the danger area. I might easily have nipped out without being noticed, gone up to the Heath, shot the girl, come back and asked for another drink. You know, Kay"—his voice was jerky—"I don't think I like it."

"But why should you specially come under suspicion?" she asked. "You're altogether too egotistic."

"We'll all come under suspicion," he replied, "and naturally it's the ones I'll come under that worry me. For one thing, it's come at a particularly inconvenient time. I was going to Paris next week."

"Oh," said Kay, "a conference."

He nodded. Charlie was always departing to the various capitals of Europe to attend conferences on housing, on design, on new building materials, then he wrote articles about them for the *Critic*. Peevishly he muttered: "And I wanted to go!"

"Never mind, there are always other conferences. What about some lunch now?" Kay slid off her stool. Charlie, still brooding, followed her out on to the windy pavement.

They had lunch in one of the small Italian restaurants further down the street—Italian in name and smell at least, though its menu offered only a choice of steak and chips and egg and chips. A waiter in a stained white apron came over to them, hung over their shoulders to wipe up some spilt coffee from the oilcloth table-top, took their order with a grunt and departed to bawl shrilly down a hatchway. The only other customers were two men who looked like taxi-drivers, playing draughts,

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and an elderly Jewess, shabbily dressed, reading a foreign newspaper.

Charlie reassured Kay, who happened not to have tried this place before, that they cooked their steaks better than you might expect from the look of things.

"And you don't often run into people here," he added.

She asked curiously: "Are you always so badly off people at this hour, Charlie, or is it just the peculiar circumstances?"

"I think I'm always off them, at all hours and in all circumstances," he answered.

"Except at three in the morning," she suggested, smiling.

"You *are* relentless, aren't you, Kay?" Picking up a fork of dubious cleanliness, he began to prod with it at the smeary blue and white oilcloth. "But is anyone quite their normal self at that hour?"

Only what, Kay wondered, did Charlie regard as his normal self? She found herself studying the deep lines that gave his face its haggardness, and thinking it was strange that she had never noticed before the blending of restlessness and melancholy in his expression. Again she reminded herself how little she knew of him. She had seldom seen him with friends, never with a woman, yet it was against the probabilities that his existence should be empty of either. But at Little Carberry Street he seemed to isolate himself from personal relationships, using his flat only for sleeping and working.

Charlie, prodding at the blue and white oilcloth, seemed to be thinking on similar lines, for suddenly he said: "Kay, I've often wondered, why did you break up with your husband?" Then, after a pause: "If that's something I ought not to have said, forget about it."

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Kay hesitated, then decided that really she would like to talk about it. "I suppose it was just one of those marriages that ought never to have happened," she said. "It would simply have had to break up sooner or later."

"All right—I'm sorry," said Charlie, "I shouldn't have asked you."

"But I don't mind. In fact——"

"Oh no!"

"I don't. But people on the whole don't like one to talk about it, it seems to embarrass them."

"What's he like, your husband?"

"Charming and difficult."

"And the girl's still in love with him, more or less?"

"That," said Kay coldly, "is the sort of conclusion always arrived at by the sentimental on evidence which is wholly insufficient."

"It sounds as if you got that answer ready for our policeman," said Charlie, laughing.

"As a matter of fact," said Kay, "last month when I was away for a fortnight I went to see Patrick. I'd been wondering in a sort of way if perhaps we'd been a couple of fools."

"And?"

"We hadn't."

Just then two plates of steak and chips appeared in the hatchway and the waiter brought them across to the table. He added a tapering bottle, the neck of which was streaked with rivulets of coagulated red sauce. Charlie started talking about the difficulty of getting eatable cheap food in London and how much better it was in Paris, and so their talk shifted back to the conference and then to the murder.

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Later they walked back together to Little Carberry Street.

By then their talk had flagged as if they had things on their minds which neither had any wish to share with the other. Throughout the meal Charlie had kept asking questions about Naomi, about what friends she had had, about how she had spent her time, about where she had gone on leaving Number Ten. He had pointed out that she had left Little Carberry Street on a Saturday and had not been murdered till the following Tuesday. Well, he had demanded, where had she spent the three intervening days? He had been as inquisitive as Inspector Cory and far less ready than the Inspector had appeared to be to accept Kay's assertions of ignorance as genuine. He had tried wheedling her, bullying her, and trapping her until Kay, pounding on the table, had asked him in a voice that made the two taxi-drivers and the fat little Jewess turn round, whether he thought he was a bloody detective himself. Charlie had grinned, apologised and made an attempt to talk of other things, but in a few minutes had relapsed into abstracted silence.

When they reached Number Ten Charlie fumbled in his pockets for his key, but, with the first reasonably guilty look Kay had ever seen on his face, brought his hands out empty.

"Kay, I'm sorry—I'm terribly sorry, I really am! And I'll never do it again," he promised, "I swear I won't. I'll have a lot of keys made, just as many as I've got suits, and I'll put one key in each suit and then it won't matter if I forget to change them over."

"It won't matter anyway," said Kay, "because I'm going to stuff the bell with paper every evening—you hadn't forgotten that, had you?" Producing her own

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key from her bag, she thrust it into the lock and they went in together.

As they crossed the hall the smell of the staircase made its usual indecent assault on their senses. Curiously enough, that smell, which was a bond of sympathy between all Miss Lingard's tenants since all of them suffered under it, was at the same time the source of a kind of pride. It really was such a triumph of a smell. As he and Kay started upstairs, Charlie observed: "You know, Kay, really it's the smell of history."

"Ted's theory is that it's just the smell of Mr. Tovey," said Kay.

"No, I don't believe in these unitary explanations," said Charlie. "I prefer to believe that it's what the centuries have left behind; it's what's been left over in the way of dirt and drains and probably dreams, successes and failures, hopes and disillusionment, life and death. That's all here if you've got the art of historical interpretation." He put an arm round her shoulders. "Are you going to ask me upstairs for some coffee, Kay?"

"I seem to have been drinking coffee all day, but I suppose it's quite a good occupation for a day like this—yes," she replied, "come along."

Murmuring something about that being, from Kay, a pressing invitation, Charlie followed her up to her flat.

While Kay went into the kitchen to put the kettle on the stove and cups and saucers on a tray, Charlie started prowling about the sitting-room, looking at her drawings, sometimes making remarks about them and sometimes whistling. The remarks were not much to the point and the whistling was only a faint hissing sound between his teeth, vaguely tuneful, and when Kay presently brought the tray through from the kitchen she found him leaning against the mantelpiece, staring into space.

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She inquired : " Still trying to beat Inspector Cory at his own job ? " and when he cocked a questioning eyebrow at her, explained : " You look so deep in thought."

" I am," he said, " and I dare say I'm at least one jump ahead of Cory, but then I've got certain advantages."

" You wouldn't be meaning your remarkable supply of brain-power, would you ? " said Kay. " Because, as you pointed out yourself, that policeman isn't a fool."

" I was referring to my closer acquaintance with some of the people involved," said Charlie with dignity. " However, just at that moment I was actually thinking about something quite different. I was thinking of the intricacies of the English divorce-law and wondering if anyone's ever told you that they aren't really as formidable as they sound. Slow and expensive, but you can get away with almost anything if it should happen to be necessary. Why don't you divorce your husband, Kay ? "

She put down the tray and started pouring out the coffee.

" Oh, I don't know, I don't see why I should," she said. " Are those your trousers I can smell singeing ? "

Saying " Damn ! " and taking a quick step away from the gas-fire, Charlie bent down and felt his calves, then turning around asked : " But aren't there certain advantages in being what's called free ? "

" Perhaps, but divorce must be a rather revolting and humiliating business, and as you said, very expensive." She brought a cup across to him. " So unless Patrick suddenly decides he wants it, I don't see that there's much to be said for the idea. I'm not drawn to re-marriage myself."

There was a pause, then Charlie said : " Oh."

It was an odd-sounding monosyllable. Particularly it sounded odd from Charlie. He had not taken the cup.

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Standing there holding it out to him, Kay felt that the moment was like that moment in the "Lion" when she had asked him what he had been doing on the Tuesday evening and he had looked at her with that startled, half-angry look on his face. "Oh," he repeated with a sort of aimlessness, "but that's—that's what everyone says, I expect." As if he were not thinking of what he was doing, he started towards the door.

"Charlie, where are you going?" she asked.

"Time I got back to work."

"But the coffee——"

"Got a lot of work to do."

In bewilderment she watched him leave. As the door closed behind him she gave an incredulous shake of her head. Then she realised that her heart was pounding. But standing there with the cup in her hand, she muttered: "No . . . No, I can't believe it!"

VIII

KAY DID SOME DESULTORY TIDYING IN HER ROOM THAT afternoon. It was the only thing she could bring herself to do. A brooding silence seemed to fill the house. Yet Little Carberry Street was no quieter than usual. Strains of thin, flaring music came in at the windows as a handful of men, two of them playing cornets and one beating a small drum, passed by in the street below. They were carrying a banner of some sort while one of the men held out a cap for pennies. Children as usual took up the tune and shrieked or whistled it after the men. From the other end of the street the hoarse,

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unintelligible shouting of a rag-and-bone man added its variations to the customary pattern of noise.

Yet the house felt almost unbearably silent. Kay kept thinking of Charlie, of his keen, lined face, his unfamiliar earnestness and his odd way of suggesting that he was in love with her ; for that, thought Kay, flicking a duster at some books and pretending to rearrange them, was what, taking his words and actions at their face-value, he had certainly been doing. But what a fool she would be if she did take them at their face-value. . . . Several times she told herself grimly to keep her mind on her tidying.

But to keep one's mind even on tidying when one is in a mood of utter indifference to the results of one's endeavours can be more mental effort than seems worth while. After a time Kay gave it up, put on a coat and started downstairs ; a cinema, she had decided, would waste her time more agreeably.

She was scarcely outside her door, with the click of the latch still sounding in her ears, when she realised how entirely subjective her idea had been that the house was silent. Ted's typewriter was tapping, Charlie's wireless was on, while from bottom to top the well of the staircase was filled with the screaming fury of a woman's voice ; Mrs. Flower was having one of her usual rows with somebody.

As usual it was a man at whom she was screaming ; his voice, gruff and level, at intervals accompanied the strident flow of hers. He sounded, thought Kay, a patient kind of man. He said only a few words at a time, said them firmly and evenly and seemed not to mind having to repeat them. "But where were you, Mrs. Flower," he kept saying, "on that Tuesday evening between eight and ten ?" Giving no sign of having heard him, Mrs. Flower's voice flowed on.

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As Kay reached the ground-floor she realised that someone besides herself had heard the conversation. Someone moved swiftly as she appeared in the hall and vanished, with a slithering sound of old slippers on the worn linoleum, down the basement stairs. Although she was used to Tovey's habits of eavesdropping, to-day this gave Kay a feeling of deep uneasiness. She hurried on and was reaching for the latch on the front door when Mrs. Flower's door was flung violently open and Inspector Cory strode out.

"Oh," he said, "so it's you!"

He looked so furious, so unlike his stolid considerate self of the morning, that a chill went down Kay's spine.

"Yes," she said, "it's me. I was just going out. That's all right, isn't it?"

"Oh, so you were just going out!" His eyes looked very blue and hard in his ruddy face. "How long do you usually stand here in the hall when you're just going out?"

Kay felt a hysterical quiver of laughter inside her. "But that wasn't me! That was just Tovey. He slipped down into the basement when he heard me coming. He's always doing it; we're all quite used to it."

The Inspector eyed her unbelievably. "It wasn't you outside this door for the last ten minutes?"

"Certainly not."

He began to simmer down. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Bryant. But someone's been breathing through that keyhole all the time I've been in here."

"Tovey's rather deaf, you see—I could have listened from half-way up the staircase," Kay assured him.

Just then Mrs. Flower appeared at Cory's elbow. She was wearing her pink dressing-gown and down-at-heel feathered mules. Her face was slightly flushed.

"That Tovey," she observed laconically, "wants his

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guts ripping out and wrapping round his neck." Then she stepped backwards and with a smart kick slammed the door shut.

Cory gave a laugh. "I didn't really expect to get much out of her," he said, "and all I've got is precisely nothing. Did you say you were going out, Mrs. Bryant?"

"Yes," said Kay.

"Going to be out long?"

"I was going to the pictures. Is that all right? I mean, we haven't been told not to go out."

"No," said Cory, "go along."

"If I sit up there I just go on thinking," she said.

"Yes, I know how it is." He accompanied her out on to the pavement. His anger had been replaced by his usual gravity. He looked, thought Kay, the sort of man who has only reluctantly become resigned to carrying heavy responsibility, the sort who had really been intended by nature for cheerfulness, openness and simplicity. "Miss Smith's father has been notified," he told her dourly. "He's on his way up this afternoon to identify the body."

Kay's forehead contracted. "That'll be a pretty distressing event, won't it?"

"Probably," he replied.

"Though I suppose you get used to that kind of thing."

"One never gets used to that kind of thing, Mrs. Bryant."

"No," said Kay. "Sorry. Silly of me."

He was walking along beside her. She noticed that he seemed to need very few steps, compared with the number she took, to keep up with her; there was a heavy, muscular economy about his movements.

"Her father's a parson, he's vicar of Redstock near Oxford," he said. "The mother's dead. Seems the girl

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was an only child and used to be kept very much under her father's thumb, never allowed to go to parties, not sent to school or college or anything, and then she suddenly did a bolt. Wonderful the way parents won't learn sense, isn't it? Keep a kid in and what does she do? Breaks out and goes wrong and gets herself murdered on Hampstead Heath. Stands to reason."

"So you think the father's really to blame for what happened?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking. But that's just a personal opinion. Unofficial."

"Oh, of course."

"I'm very interested in the problem of education," said Inspector Cory with what Kay thought was a touch of shyness.

"You've got children of your own perhaps?" she said.

"That's right. Three. All girls."

"How old are they?"

"Six years, three years and eighteen months. Their names are June, Joanna and Jennifer."

An entirely unofficial warmth had flowed into his voice. Kay asked him where they lived.

"We've just moved into a nice little house at Arno's Grove," he told her. "June's taking quite an interest in the garden already. She's got her own little bit—it's only a yard square but she's as proud of it as can be—and she's planted nasturtiums. They won't grow because she won't leave them alone, but I think you ought to let children learn by their mistakes. You ought to let them express their own ideas and develop initiative. Not that I go all the way with these theories about letting them have their own way in everything, even if it comes to chopping up the furniture with a hatchet, but I do think you want

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them to feel free and independent and able to choose their own way in life. Then they won't go running out on you suddenly and getting themselves murdered on Hampstead Heath." He paused and cleared his throat self-consciously. With a sidelong glance at Kay, he concluded: "Mind you, I know their mother and me'll have just as much trouble with them as most people do—they're perky youngsters."

In the midst of death, thought Kay, we are in life, Detective Inspector Cory of the C.I.D. has three little girls and a nice little house at Arno's Grove. . . .

"I'm afraid Naomi's rebellion can't have been very successful," she remarked. "She was much too shy to get much out of life."

"That's something I was coming to," said Cory. "I was wanting to ask you, did you ever hear any men in her room?"

Kay considered. "I don't think so."

"Think carefully," he urged her. "Are you sure?"

"At one time there was a rather meek young man who used to have tea and read the poems he'd written," said Kay, "but that's a good while ago. I'm sure there hasn't been anyone recently."

"Yet there *was* a man."

Kay turned her head to look at him questioningly.

The good father of June, Joanna and Jennifer stared straight ahead of him and did not meet the look. Instead he went on: "It may have been with the man in question that she stayed from the Saturday to the Tuesday. We've found no trace so far of how she spent those three days. We've found the firm that moved and stored her furniture, and we've gone through it, but we haven't happened on anything that helps in any way. If we could find out where she went to . . . Surely she must have had some

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friends, Mrs. Bryant. Surely some time or other someone came to visit her."

They had reached Theobald's Road and as if he did not intend to go any further, Inspector Cory stood still.

"Well, of course it's possible, I'm not in all day," Kay reminded him. "I could easily have missed them."

"But you're in a good deal of the time," he insisted. "You work in your room, don't you? If you always missed them, that in itself has something odd about it."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"It suggests for one thing that they knew your comings and goings fairly accurately."

"In other words, that it was someone in the house?"

"Yes."

"But Naomi herself knew my comings and goings fairly accurately. She might have chosen the times when she knew I'd be out to invite them. She may have been enough of the parson's daughter still to expect me to be shocked if she entertained men in her room. Anyhow, the only man I've heard in there during the last two or three months was Tovey. He seemed to like her rather. He used to go in and grumble at her about things. She seemed quite to like him too. She told me once that he wasn't nearly as bad as he looked."

"I doubt if he's the one we're looking for," said Cory briefly. "Well, thanks, Mrs. Bryant. I won't bother you any more just now but I'll have to talk with you again later. What picture are you going to see? The wife tells me there's a very nice gangster show at the Plaza. She likes gangster shows, she says they take her mind off things. Never get time for them myself." Tipping his bowler hat an inch off his forehead, he strode away down the street. Kay crossed the road and boarded a bus for Piccadilly.

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She avoided the gangsters, recommended by the Inspector's wife, and spent a comfortably unthinking couple of hours watching a heavy-jowled hero trying to establish his claim to a blonde heroine and being incredibly clumsy about this relatively simple business. There was a good deal of self-sacrifice in the story, not to mention slugging and jumping in and out of aeroplanes and on the whole Kay felt that she was having her money's worth. She stayed for the newsreel and the cartoon, but when the organ, in a beam of heliotrope light, rose slowly out of its infernal regions, she edged her way out. It was about half-past six when she got back to Little Carberry Street.

The evening was warmer than the day had been and the sky was a faint, clear blue, blown clear of cloud. In the square at the end of the street the plane trees were breaking into leaf; Kay had not noticed that before; she had not noticed that spring was upon them again. But in London, she thought, spring always takes you by surprise. One day you notice the crocuses in the park and the next time you think about it you discover that trees are green already and lilacs are in bloom and lawns are being mown.

In the middle of Little Carberry Street two grey pigeons were walking round one another. The male was ruffling his neck-feathers and making noises like a discreet electric horn. They let Kay pass within a yard of them without taking any notice of her. The pigeons and the plane trees made her feel for a few minutes that everything that had happened that day was unreal, everything except the birds' cooing and the leaves and the warmth in the air. However, as soon as she pushed open the door of Number Ten and smelt the smell of the hall, that feeling vanished. Dirt and squalor were real, and so was murder. So was Mrs. Flower, coming quickly down the staircase, dressed in

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a new spring suit of red and white checks, with a few bows of black velvet and a froth of veiling perched on the top of her head.

She gave Kay a suspicious stare as she went by, darting into her flat and closing the door so swiftly that it looked as if she were trying to prevent Kay's speaking to her. Kay wondered what Mrs. Flower had been doing upstairs; her perfume, which had a kind of edible smell, reminding Kay of the filling in cheap cakes, hung cloyingly on top of the usual odours of the staircase. Kay even thought, as she let herself into her flat, that her room was full of the embarrassing fragrance.

Lighting the gas-fire, she dropped on to the divan, lying back on the cushions.

Then she sat up again.

The room did smell of Mrs. Flower.

Uncertainly she looked about her, wondering if it was possible that Mrs. Rose had been in the room. But what could she have come in for? And how could she have got in? Perhaps the scent had merely been sucked in by some draught or come in with Kay when she opened the door. At any rate, it was disagreeable. Going over to one of the windows, Kay flung it open.

However, while she was doing this, some thought, some feeling, was fluttering at the edge of her mind. She knew that something was wrong in the room. Something was not where it ought to be.

For some minutes the thing evaded her, then suddenly as she crossed to the fireplace to tap her cigarette into an ash-tray, she knew what it was. The pearl necklace which had been left coiled up beside a lustre mug on the mantelpiece was missing.

The first thought that came into Kay's mind as she stood looking at the spot where the pearls had lain was a

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wild idea that the pearls had not been Woolworth pearls at all but had been real, had been valuable, and had just been stolen by Mrs. Flower. It was a thought which gave her a very uncomfortable few minutes. Then, more soberly, she reflected that real pearl necklaces were not very likely to find their way to Little Carberry Street. More probably, she thought, the necklace was Mrs. Flower's property. Perhaps she had mentioned to Tovey that she had lost it and he had told her where it was to be found.

But all the same, how had she got in?

Kay decided that she did not like it. After a little more thought she went downstairs and tapped on Mrs. Flower's door.

"Good evening," she said pleasantly when Mrs. Flower opened it, "so you got your pearls back all right, did you?"

Through the film of spotted veiling that hung over half her face, Mrs. Flower looked a little startled.

"Yes, thanks," she said indifferently, "I got 'em."

"I suppose Tovey told you he'd found them," said Kay.

"That's right," said Mrs. Flower.

"You got them from my room, didn't you? I left them on the mantelpiece," said Kay.

"That's right," said Mrs. Flower again and started to draw back and close the door.

"I thought I'd just tell you that I don't much care for people going into my room without my permission," said Kay.

"Sorry," said Mrs. Flower with a shrug of her thin shoulders, "I found your door ajar and thought you wouldn't mind if I popped in."

"The door was not ajar," said Kay.

"Eh?" said Mrs. Flower.

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"It was not ajar."

"It was."

"It was not." For Kay remembered distinctly the click of the latch when, on coming out of her room that afternoon, she had pulled the door to behind her.

"Are you trying to insinuate," said Mrs. Flower, "that I went and bust your door in or something? Don't be a fool, dear. Take a look at the lock and see if I did any tampering with it."

"I don't know how you got in but I do know that I didn't leave the door ajar," said Kay.

"Listen," said Mrs. Flower, her tone changing, "you'd better be careful, see? You'd better be careful what you say, because if you start saying things about your precious door, I'll start saying things about the way you hung on to my necklace. A nice thing it was too, I must say, hanging on to it! What did you think you were going to do with it? Just say nothing for a while and see if you could get away with it? Suppose old Tovey hadn't told me he'd found it, I suppose you'd have come looking for me, wouldn't you? F—— likely! And where did you think they came from? Some classy jeweller?" She laughed. "Nice sort of people live here, I must say! Nice, respectable, murdering, thieving people! But you be careful what you say about me, that's all—you just be careful!"

With a venomous glare through her spotted veiling she stepped back into her room and slammed the door in Kay's face.

IX

SO WITHIN A VERY SHORT PERIOD KAY HAD BEEN accused of listening at keyholes and of attempting to steal a string of artificial pearls.

She was doing pretty well, she thought.

But could those pearls possibly not have been imitation? To be thought capable of attempting to steal jewels of some value would, after all, be less of an indignity; the accusation might even have some obscure compliment tucked away in it somewhere. Turning to go upstairs again, Kay came on Melissa waiting on the half-landing, beckoning mysteriously.

"I heard all that," she said in a penetrating whisper, "it's just what we want."

"Do we?" asked Kay. "Why?"

"To make the old Lingard bitch do something. I'll telephone her immediately. We'll tell her Mrs. Flower has been grossly insulting to you and that she's admitted going into your room without your permission and taking the pearls. What pearls, by the way? And what really happened?" Melissa's eyes sparkled and her voice was full of enthusiasm.

Kay told her of Tovey's discovery of the necklace on the stairs and of how it had been left for her to hand over to its owner. "What's worrying me," she concluded, following Melissa into her flat, "is how Mrs. Flower got into my room."

"Perhaps you really didn't shut the door, but we certainly won't admit that to Miss Lingard," said Melissa

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Ted, who was lying on the sofa reading, looked up and said irritably : " Now what's up ? "

Automatically Melissa replied : " Ted, you do look awful." Crossing to the telephone and dialling, she added casually : " Mrs. Flower's just been accusing Kay of stealing her pearls. Isn't it luck ? Ted, give Kay some sherry. Oh——" With the telephone to her ear she suddenly stared at him as if something about him had just struck her with full emotional force. In a voice full of pain she exclaimed : " Oh Ted, you do look *awful* ! "

She herself as usual was looking magnificent. She was wearing one of her most successful secondhand bargains, a red dress with a high neck and full sleeves, and almost certainly she looked far more aristocratic in it than the lady of title who had paid the original thirty guineas for it. She had a catastrophic ladder in one stocking but carried that off without any loss of poise. .

Heaving himself off the sofa, Ted started searching vaguely amongst the customary litter of cups and saucers on the table for a glass that might be taken as clean.

" You'll have to get one from the kitchen," Melissa told him impatiently. " Hell——" She gave the telephone a shake. " Nobody's answering. I suppose there's nobody in but the mythical Mr. Roote, and myths, I suppose, don't answer telephones."

Ted had obediently wandered away to the kitchen. Returning with a glass, he poured out some sherry and gave it to Kay.

" There you are, ducks—now what are all these aspersions on your character ? " he said. " What's actually been happening ? "

Kay told him the story she had just told Melissa.

" Umm," he said when she finished, " so Mrs. Flower has got a key to your flat."

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"That's what it looks like," said Kay, "and I don't think I like it very much."

"Your flat used to be occupied by a friend and colleague of hers," said Ted.

"Of course that's it," said Melissa. "You'd better get the lock changed." With a sigh of frustration she put the telephone down, crossed to the table and helped herself to sherry. "Nobody in—I'll try again later. What d'you really think about this murder, Kay?"

Kay wrinkled her forehead. "How I wish people wouldn't ask that kind of question," she said.

"Why?" asked Melissa. "Personally I just think it's simply awful."

"Well, so do I, of course," said Kay.

"You do? You really do?"

"Melissa," said Ted sternly, "do you imagine that Kay may be secretly revelling in thoughts of blood and mutilation?"

"Well, lots of people do, don't they?" said Melissa. "You can't always tell by looking at them. And after all, it's quite a natural way to feel, and I was just thinking that if by any chance she did feel like that it'd be interesting to hear about it. You're sure"—she looked penetratingly at Kay—"you're *sure* you think it's awful?"

"Quite sure," said Kay.

"Of course, Ted and I have a special reason for thinking it awful," said Melissa. "The whole thing's going to get in the papers and then our families are going to come fussing around and finding out about us and cutting us off with a shilling unless we get married or something."

"And just for the present," said Ted, "a shilling isn't quite enough. We have such extravagant habits."

"Just as a matter of curiosity," said Kay, "why don't you get married?"

"Oh, your value slumps so once you're married," said

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Melissa discontentedly. "Nobody's interested in you any more unless you do a lot of advertising of yourself as definitely immoral, which, of course, we aren't so very."

"The advertising, you see, is done free of charge," said Ted with what Kay thought was a trace of bitterness in his tone, "if you simply live rather publicly in sin."

"Well," said Melissa, "that does at least leave people to draw their own conclusions about you, and if they're a bit wrong you can't be blamed for it, can you? Give Kay some more sherry, Ted—why don't you ever look after guests properly?" She broke off. A tap had sounded on the door.

There was a short silence, then Ted muttered: "Police again."

Melissa looked excited. "Perhaps it's that marvellous Inspector. Didn't you think he was marvellous, Kay? He likes poetry, you know, he told me so. He likes poetry about trees. I think he must be one of those awfully queer, thrilling, simple men."

"He has three little girls called June, Joanna and Jennifer and he he lives at Arnos Grove," Kay contributed.

"The things you girls do find out," said Ted. "I only know he doesn't drink on duty."

"Ssh," said Melissa, "we'd better let him in." After a quick glance at her lipstick in a mirror on the wall, she opened the door.

But there was no one on the landing but Pamela Fuller.

Concealing any disappointment she may have felt, Melissa said hospitably: "Oh hullo, come in and have some sherry. We're all having sherry." As Pamela came in, looking white and distraught, she added: "Ted, you'd better go out and get us another bottle. No, get two. I feel rather like going on. Actually I feel like going on and on, so you might get some beer too. Because now that I come to think of it, I feel rather like getting

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drunk. Go on Ted—and tell Charlie Boyce to come up if he's about because this is obviously the sort of crisis when everyone wants to get drunk, and it'll be much better if we all do it together."

Ted replied with some vague grumbling, but he seemed to think himself that getting drunk was not a bad idea and he went off surprisingly quickly to fetch the drinks.

Pamela had dropped wearily into a chair. She combed her fingers through her fair, upstanding hair. "Isn't it all ghastly?" she said.

"Well, it is," said Melissa cheerfully, "that's what we've just been saying. And yet none of us cared much about the girl, you know."

"I didn't even know her," said Pamela harshly, "but I'm living in her room and they found the revolver that killed her under my floor. Of course it's just my unholy luck, as usual, making me take that room when there were several others to choose from."

"Well, at any rate there aren't any bugs here," said Melissa.

"There are worse things!"

"What—worse than bugs?" said Melissa, astonished.

"There's a murderer among us," Pamela reminded her.

"But once you've caught a murderer and hanged him you're finished with him," said Melissa, "you don't usually find another one creeping out of the wall."

"But don't you realise," cried Pamela in a thin, high voice, "one of us in this house——?"

"—— Is a murderer, yes, of course. And for all we know"—Melissa looked serenely at the other two—"it's one of us in this room. I've always thought Kay could do a murder, she's got such a lot of bottled up aggressiveness. And I should think you could too," she said to Pamela, "you seem so violent. And that, you see, is the sort of idea that makes me feel I'd like to get drunk. But let me tell you that if you were a bug instead of a murderer,

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I shouldn't be waiting to get drunk. I should be packing up my possessions and dashing straight off to the cleansing-station." She drained her sherry glass and gave a sigh. "I once had a wonderful holiday in Italy," she said, but did not offer to connect this remark with the one before it. "Now I think I'll try ringing up Miss Lingard again."

She had better luck this time; Miss Lingard was in. Eagerly Melissa poured out a colourful account of Kay's argument with Mrs. Flower. Melissa's method of narration, however, was complex, and she was still involved in the story when Ted, accompanied by Charlie Boyce, reappeared with an armful of bottles.

Ted started a hunt for a glass for Charlie. Charlie said: "Hullo, Melissa," and perched himself on the arm of a chair. When his eyes met Kay's he looked at her directly for an instant then turned his head away, to encounter, from across the room, a scowl of black hatred from Pamela. She had evidently not forgiven him yet for his disturbing of her sleep. He replied to the scowl with one of his pleasantest smiles. Kay, as she saw it, told herself to bear it in mind; it was incredibly like the kind of smile that Patrick turned on when he intended to enjoy himself annoying somebody.

Melissa put down the telephone. "Miss Lingard says she'll come round presently," she said with satisfaction.

Charlie asked: "Still trying to get that unfortunate Mrs. Flower turned out?"

"Of course," said Melissa. "And this time something may come of it. We can't have her breaking into people's rooms."

"Why not leave the poor woman alone?" Charlie suggested. "Are we all so blameless?"

"No, but we are hygienic. At least"—Melissa looked insecure for a moment—"Ted isn't very, he won't have baths, which is odd really and I don't know where he gets

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it from, because I'm sure he had quite a clean sort of upbringing——"

"Stick to the subject, woman," growled Ted, returning from the kitchen with a glass for Charlie. He had just washed the glass and was drying it with a blue and white check cloth. "And the subject is Mrs. Flower."

"Well," said Melissa, "as I was saying, Mrs. Flower's morals are of course her own affair, and if there happened to be more adequate sanitation in this house I'd certainly leave her in peace. But I don't like having to share the one and only office-of-works with a house of ill-fame. If Miss Lingard likes to do a little plumbing she can keep her Mrs. Flower. Ted——!" She turned on him suddenly. "Ted, that's a *duster* you've got hold of! You don't dry glasses with dusters."

Ted looked uncomprehendingly at the cloth in his hand. "It seems quite clean," he said.

"But it's a *duster*. You don't dry glasses with dusters, you dry them with glass-cloths."

"Formalism," said Ted. "Most ridiculous, ducks." He handed the glass to Charlie. "What'll you have, Charlie?"

But Melissa, snatching the cloth away from Ted, crumpled it up in her hand, and as if the sight of it offended her violently, threw it away through the open door of the kitchen. Kay saw it land on a corner of the dresser, draping itself over a butter-dish.

Pamela also saw it. Pamela stared at it with startled, almost frightened recognition on her pale, freckled face, then she turned her head quickly and stared questioningly at Kay.

Giving no sign of understanding the look, Kay returned it blankly.

Pamela bit her lip and frowned down into her glass of sherry. While the others went on talking she sat there silent and brooding and evidently thinking hard.

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The party, as a party, was not a success. The talk never got away from the murder. After every attempt to shift it on to a pleasanter subject it drifted helplessly back, borne on the steady undertow of each individual's thoughts.

At one point Kay told the others of her talk that afternoon with Inspector Cory.

"He seems certain it's a man they want," she said, "because it appears—at least I think that that's what the Inspector was hinting in a discreet sort of way—Naomi wasn't a virgin."

"He *hinted* that to you, did he?" cried Melissa, looking indignant. "But he just said it straight out to me—he said it in two-letter words! Oh Ted——" She turned to him in agitated appeal. "Ted, that isn't fair! Why should he be so bald and crude with me when he's so polite and refined with Kay?"

Ted chuckled and said consolingly: "Poor ducks."

Kay went on: "He said he was specially interested in the three days between Naomi's leaving here and the night she was murdered. He seems to think she may have spent them with the man in question."

"Meaning he isn't actually restricting his suspicions to people in this house," said Ted, "because I shouldn't think he can believe that either Charlie or I could keep the girl tucked away here."

"Fortunately," said Charlie, "if my alibi isn't too secure for the night of the murder itself, it's all right for the three days."

"So is mine," said Ted, "if Melissa's word counts. But I'm not too happy about the Tuesday night myself."

"Nor am I," said Melissa.

"They're looking for a man, ducks," Ted reminded her.

"Don't be so absurd," she said. "If it was you she'd been staying with, then it'd quite likely be me that mur-

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dered her, wouldn't it? And if it was Charlie, then it'd probably be Kay, who's got a much more jealous temperament than I have anyway, so it'd be more likely to be her than me."

"Just what," asked Charlie abruptly, "do you think you're talking about, Melissa?"

"Don't take any notice of her," said Ted. "The girl's always having ideas. However, she's right that they're going to want alibis from all of us, and mine, of all damned misfortunes, consists of going to see that Gabin film at the Everyman, which is only a few minutes walk from the Heath. I don't imagine any attendant is going to swear I never left my seat."

"Well, I was in the neighbourhood too," said Charlie, and described his round of parties.

Kay repeated that she had spent the evening in bed.

Doing some complicated calculations on her fingers, Melissa announced: "That Tuesday was the evening I cut out my cami-knickers. I'd got some lovely satin for them, and a marvellous pattern, and that was the evening I did the cutting out."

Pamela suddenly joined in the conversation: "Did that take a whole evening, Miss Ivory?"

The question had a hostile sound. It made everyone look at her. Slumped in her chair, she was glowering at the floor, her mind apparently in a state of deep confusion.

"Oh, it took an awfully long time," said Melissa vaguely. "I've never made any cami-knickers before and I don't understand patterns. Last time I tried to sew something Charlie came in and helped me with the cutting-out, but he wasn't in on Tuesday."

"And what about you, Pamela?" Charlie asked quietly. "I know you weren't living here at the time and that you didn't know Naomi, but all the same—just where were you?"

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"Oh, I think I was just at home," Pamela answered indifferently. "In my old digs, that is."

"Where were they?"

"In Guilford Street."

His black eyes rested thoughtfully on her face for a moment. Then he got to his feet.

"Well, on the whole," he said, "our answers strike me as pretty satisfactory. None of us seems to have an unfair advantage over any of the others. Now I think, if you don't mind, Melissa, I'll be getting along."

Melissa looked disappointed at her party starting to dissolve so soon, but when Kay and Pamela also got up to leave neither she nor Ted made any attempt to make them stay.

Kay, when she stood up, realised that she was not really as sober as she had thought; her head was swimming a little and her feet felt a long way off. But mentally she merely felt more detached than usual. The sherry and beer she had drunk had not cheered her up in the least, but only given a coldness, a dissipated bleakness to her vision. She did not speak to Pamela as they went upstairs together and on the landing they separated in silence.

Kay found that the smell of Mrs. Flower had faded from her room. Closing the window, she sat down and took up a book. But almost immediately she was disturbed by a tap on her door. For a moment she considered ignoring it, but as the tap was repeated, she rose and went to the door. Outside on the shadowy landing stood Tovey.

He gave a warning nod towards Pamela's door to remind Kay that they could be overheard, then leaning forward, put his lips close to her ear. A smell of cheese, onions and what she thought might be rotting teeth made her head swim worse than ever.

"Listen," he whispered hoarsely, "I ain't never had nothing against that Miss Smith."

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"Good," said Kay, "I'm very glad to hear it."

"Ssh!" he hissed with a frown. "Look, miss, you'd better believe me—I ain't never had nothing against that Miss Smith. That Miss Smith was all right."

"Well?" said Kay, wondering at his tone. There was a grating menace in it.

"She was a nice young lady," said Tovey, "she was all right. So I'm telling you something." He leant still closer. "I ain't never said nothing to that Mrs. Flower about them pearls—I ain't never said a word. So when I heard her say as it was me what told her, why, you blooming liar, I says to meself, I ain't going to let you get away with that, I says. So that's what I come to tell you, see? It's the truth, I ain't never said a word to her."

"But then d'you mean . . .?" Kay paused, for she did not understand what he meant at all, nor did she understand his threatening way of speaking. "D'you mean that perhaps it wasn't the pearls that Mrs. Flower came in for?"

"It's none of my business to mean nothing," he replied.

"But that is what you mean, isn't it?" She caught him by the sleeve as he was turning to go. "You mean she came in here for some reason of her own, she came in here and just happened to see the pearls?"

"I don't mean nothing," he answered fiercely, wrenching his sleeve out of her hold. "I told you I don't know nothing and I don't mean nothing. I just come to tell you as I ain't never said a word to that Mrs. Flower about them pearls, and when she goes and says it was me what done it, she's a blooming liar."

With a black scowl to discourage further questions, he shambled off downstairs.

X

ABOUT TEN MINUTES LATER KAY EXCLAIMED ALOUD :
"What a perfect fool I am !"

She had just realised that there had never been any reason to suppose that it had been Tovey who had told Mrs. Flower of the whereabouts of her necklace. No reason, that is, other than Mrs. Flower's statement.

It was, as a matter of fact, unlikely that Tovey could have known that Kay had the necklace. Having handed it over to Miss Lingard, he had gone downstairs again. That Miss Lingard would leave it with Kay was not something that he could have been expected to guess. So it must have been Miss Lingard herself who had told Mrs. Flower that her string of pearls was on Kay's mantel-piece.

The fact remained that Mrs. Flower had managed to get into Kay's room through a locked door. Well, to-morrow the lock could be changed. Kay had a supper of cheese on toast and decided to go to bed early.

But in this she was frustrated by another visit from Inspector Cory. Somewhat to Kay's surprise, he wanted to hear her version of the finding and the disappearance of the pearls. He had just been given a highly coloured account of it by Melissa, and with a slightly dazed look in his eye, as if his mind had not yet cleared again properly after the experience, he almost begged Kay to stick to the simple facts. "Just what happened, please, Mrs. Bryant—just simply what happened."

"But what does it matter? Can a string of Woolworth pearls have something to do with a murder?" asked Kay.

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"Just the facts—just the facts, *please*, Mrs. Bryant!" The Inspector was looking tired and nerve-worn.

However, as soon as Kay began, he raised a hand to stop her. There had been the sound of a chair scraping across the floor in Pamela's room.

"We can be overheard here, I suppose?" he said.

"Very easily," Kay assured him.

"Then, if you don't mind, we'll go out somewhere. I'd as soon hear what you have to tell me without anyone listening in."

"But is the thing really so important?" Kay did not in the least want to go out.

"In a murder investigation anything and everything may be important," he told her sombrely.

"But some Woolworth pearls——"

"Are you so very sure they were Woolworth's?"

Meeting his eyes, Kay checked the reply she had been about to make. They went out together. He took her to the small café at the bottom of Little Carberry Street where Cory ordered coffee and sandwiches. He did not speak again until the sandwiches had been brought, when, pushing the plate towards her, leaning his elbows on the table, he said: "Well now, *were* they Woolworth's?"

"Well, they may have been something slightly costlier than that," said Kay with an uncertain smile. "The truth is, I didn't notice."

"You're quite certain, at any rate, that they were artificial?"

"Artificial? Why, you mean——?" She looked at him sharply. "Have you some reason for thinking they may not have been?"

"If you don't mind," said Cory, "I'll ask the questions and you just tell me the facts—the simple facts."

"Then it's a simple fact," said Kay, "that I haven't the faintest idea what sort of pearls they were. When I first

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found they'd gone I did for a moment have a wild idea that perhaps they were real, but I dismissed it because it seemed so very unlikely that anyone at Number Ten Little Carberry Street could own such a thing as a real pearl necklace."

"Then you don't think you could tell the difference between real and artificial pearls?" asked Cory.

"Between real and some artificial pearls I suppose I could, if I gave it my attention. But I just didn't, you see. I scarcely looked at the things."

"Then no doubt you'll be quite amused if that string of beads turns out to be worth several thousand pounds."

"But d'you mean——?"

"If you don't mind . . ." he checked her again. "Perhaps they were real, perhaps they weren't, but I'll tell you one thing, since you're interested. It's not impossible they were real, even if it was Little Carberry Street they turned up in. A lot of queer things turn up in places like Little Carberry Street. Now go ahead and tell me just what happened."

Kay bit into a ham sandwich. "It was this morning around half-past twelve, I think," she said. "Miss Lingard was in my room, talking about how she doesn't interfere in the lives of any of her lodgers and so doesn't know anything about them—I'm not breaking a confidence by telling you that, I think she wanted me to hand it on—well, Tovey knocked at the door and produced the necklace. He seemed to think it belonged to Miss Lingard. But she was wearing one already, so she asked me if this was mine——"

"Wait a moment," said Cory, "where did the caretaker say he found the necklace?"

"On the stairs."

"Whereabouts on the stairs?"

"I don't think he mentioned that."

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"I was just thinking," said Cory, "that Mrs. Flower lives on the ground floor. Yet her necklace was found on the stairs. Has she any reason, generally speaking, for going upstairs?"

"Not that I know of."

"I see. Well, go on."

"I said I hadn't got a pearl necklace," said Kay, "and Miss Lingard suggested it must belong to Miss Fuller or Miss Ivory. For some reason neither of us thought of Mrs. Flower. Tovey went off downstairs and then Miss Lingard put the pearls on my mantelpiece and asked me if I'd hand them over to whomever they belonged to. I went out soon after that and I was out most of the day. When I came in at about half-past six I met Mrs. Flower coming downstairs and I sort of wondered what she'd been doing on the upper floors. Then when I got into my room I found the whole place was full of the perfume she uses—you can't mistake it. And then I noticed the pearls were gone. I thought Tovey must have found out they were Mrs. Flower's and told her where they were, but I didn't like the idea that she'd just walked into my room, so I went downstairs and tackled her, and she said yes, the pearls were hers, Tovey'd told her about them and she'd gone upstairs, found my door ajar and thought I wouldn't mind if she just popped in. I told her I knew the door hadn't been ajar—as it happened, I remembered quite clearly hearing the latch——"

"You're certain of that?"

"Absolutely certain. But naturally, Mrs. Flower didn't much like my saying it and started accusing me of having tried to keep the necklace. So we parted not on the best of terms."

"And that's all?"

"Except that Tovey came up to me later—I suppose he'd been eavesdropping as usual—and told me he'd got

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nothing against Naomi Smith and that he'd never said a word to Mrs. Flower about the pearls. At first that worried me a good deal. I thought Mrs. Flower must have some other reason for wanting to get into my room, though I couldn't think what it could be. But when I thought things over I realised that it couldn't have been Tovey anyway from whom she'd heard about the pearls. He'd gone downstairs already when Miss Lingard handed them over to me. So it must have been Miss Lingard herself who told Mrs. Flower she'd got them."

"Have you asked Miss Lingard if she did?"

"No, I haven't seen her."

Reaching for the sugar-bowl, Cory dropped three lumps into his cup and stirred it thoughtfully.

"Why should Mrs. Flower have told you it was Tovey she'd got the information from if in fact it was from Miss Lingard?" he asked.

"I don't know," Kay admitted.

"It may not be of much importance," said Cory. "People like Mrs. Flower often suffer from an incapacity—it's almost a form of mental deficiency—to give straight answers to harmless questions. But I think we'll have a talk with Miss Lingard and see if she really did tell Mrs. Flower you'd got the pearls."

"And suppose she didn't?"

"Then I think we'll have to find out what did take Mrs. Flower into your room."

For a minute or two while the Inspector ate up a couple of sandwiches, Kay sat silently thinking over what he had just been saying to her. She could not understand where a pearl necklace, real or artificial, found on the stairs that day, fitted in with a murder committed nearly three weeks ago.

"I suppose," she said presently, "you saw Naomi's father this afternoon?"

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Cory nodded. He was eating hungrily as if he had missed his dinner.

"He was pretty badly broken up too—feels it terribly," he said. "I don't relish that kind of interview. He couldn't tell us anything useful either. Like I guessed, he's certain he's always done right by the girl and couldn't think how such a terrible thing could have happened."

"I can't myself," murmured Kay.

"Well, you live and learn," said Cory. "Finished, Mrs. Bryant?"

"Yes, thanks."

Polishing off the last sandwich, Cory beckoned to the waitress, paid, and ushered Kay out again into Little Carberry Street.

As he stood looking up and down, peering at the numbers of the houses near him by the light of the street lamps, Kay wondered if he meant her to stay with him or to go home. He cleared up her uncertainty by taking her by the elbow and steering her across the street.

"Come along, we'll go and have this talk with this landlady of yours," he said. "It'll save trouble if you're there to tell her just what happened. She lives at Number Seventeen, doesn't she? Have you ever been to see her there?"

"No," said Kay. As he hurried her along she added discontentedly: "I do wish I understood why those pearls seem to matter so much."

"All right," said Cory, "I'll tell you." He stopped in front of one of the tall old houses and looked over the row of names beside the bells. "You're acquainted with Mrs. Flower's profession, aren't you?"

"So I believe," said Kay.

"Well,"—he pressed a finger on the bell labelled "Roote and Lingard"—"so are the police. Why d'you think they've done nothing about her?"

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"Oh, I've always been given to understand there are lots of ways of getting round the police, particularly for the people in that profession," said Kay innocently.

"Maybe." He laughed shortly. "However, in this case it just happens that we're a good deal more interested in some of the lady's clients than we are in the lady herself. Some of the most regular are gentlemen we know a good deal about. Unfortunately we don't know quite as much about them as we'd like to know. But their fidelity to Mrs. Flower is in itself rather interesting, so we're watching for developments."

"But then. . . . Are they jewel-thieves or something?" Kay frowned up at him, not quite sure if she understood him. "Is that what you mean? And is that why the necklace . . . ?"

"Yes," said Cory, "that's it more or less." He pressed his finger on the bell again. "Can you hear this bell ringing?"

"I think so," she said.

"Looks as if nobody's in, then."

"But d'you mean that Mrs. Flower's a receiver, or whatever you call it?" Kay pressed him.

"She may at any rate be a link in the chain. But I'll admit it's not like the people I'm talking about to leave valuable jewels lying on staircases, so perhaps I'm all wrong and these particular jewels did come from Woolworth's."

"And Naomi's murder. . . . She could have walked into something, I suppose—found out something."

"She could have." Cory gave one more ring at the bell, then said: "It's no good—we'll have to try again later."

"Miss Lingard might be at Number Ten," said Kay. "She promised she'd look in this evening to hear the damning facts about Mrs. Flower."

"All right," said Cory, "I'll come along and see."

It was the hour when the traffic of the day had mostly ceased, when those who were going to pubs had already

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gone there and had not yet dispersed, when whispering figures, clasped together, lurked in doorways, and when only a few handfuls of the children of the neighbourhood roamed the empty streets. Three of these, looking bored and ready to be interested in trouble, loitered by, standing still to stare at Cory as if they recognised by instinct that he was a policeman.

When Kay unlocked the door of Number Ten, she and Cory immediately came face to face with Miss Lingard, who was standing at the foot of the stairs, talking to Tovey. As soon as she saw Cory she broke off her conversation and with one of her sugary smiles and with her loose shoes going clack, clack on the linoleum she advanced to meet him. Tovey made off rapidly towards his basement, but Cory called him back. "I'd like a word with both of you if you don't mind!"

Half turning, Tovey growled over his shoulder: "What about?"

"A matter of some importance," said Cory, adding, as the door of the ground-floor flat opened a couple of inches: "All right, come out, Mrs. Flower, I may as well talk to all three of you."

The door opened a little further and Mrs. Flower lounged out into the hall. She stood with one bony hip protruding and a hand poised defiantly on the hip. She had on her glasses, which made her eyes look large and blank and slightly out of focus.

"Well, as I was saying," said Cory, "this may be of some importance and I want straight answers. Miss Lingard, was it you who told Mrs. Flower that you'd left a necklace, found on the staircase this morning, with Mrs. Bryant?"

Miss Lingard gave a vigorous shake of her hennaed curls. "The whole thing had gone right out of my mind, Inspector, until Miss Ivory phoned me up this

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evening with some muddled-up talk about the pearls having been taken from Mrs. Bryant's room. I never said a word about them to anybody. Careless of me, I suppose, and I'm ever so sorry if it's led to trouble of any kind. But I just didn't give the matter another thought once I'd handed them to Mrs. Bryant to give to whichever of the young ladies they belonged to."

Kay heard a soft snigger from Mrs. Flower.

Cory, if he heard it, took no notice of it. He turned to Tovey, but before he could get any words out, the caretaker burst out fiercely: "I ain't said nothing about nothing to nobody! I ain't said a word. It's like I told Mrs. Bryant—I told her, I ain't said nothing, I said, I told her——"

"All right, all right," said Cory, "I've got that. Now where did you find the necklace?"

"Like I said, on the stairs."

"Whereabouts on the stairs?"

"In a corner."

"But how high up?" It sounded as if Cory's patience might crack at any moment. "First floor, second floor——?"

"How should I remember how high up?" said Tovey. "I was sweeping and I found 'em tucked away in a corner like. I thought they was Miss Lingard's and I handed 'em over to her and I didn't give 'em another thought."

"You'll have to do better than that," said Cory sternly. "You must be able to remember which floor you were near when you found them."

"Well, I can't."

Miss Lingard joined in sweetly: "Oh, surely you can, Tovey, if you really try."

The old man rounded on her. "You keep your mouth shut, you old cow!" he snarled. "If I says I don't remember, I don't, see? What d'you think I am, a liar?"

Mrs. Flower gave another snigger. "That's just what you are and no mistake. Sweeping the stairs! Cory,

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you take a look at those stairs and see if they've been swept these six months ! ”

“ You keep your bleeding mouth shut ! ” Tovey shouted at her. “ I do my job. You ask Miss Lingard——”

“ You'll all have to do a lot better than this ! ” Cory's voice was harsh. “ May I remind you that a murder has been committed, almost certainly by someone in this house ? You're all of you under suspicion. If I don't get straight answers to my questions you're all of you likely to find yourselves in serious trouble. Now then, Mrs. Flower, do you stick to it that it was Tovey who told you that the necklace was in Mrs. Bryant's room ? ”

With a derisive grin she rolled her cigarette from one corner of her mouth to the other.

“ What necklace ? ” she inquired sweetly. “ Everyone's been doing a lot of talking about a necklace. People come to me and accuse me of pinching one, they come and accuse me of breaking open their doors, they come and argue amongst themselves who's said what to me and when and why. Well, all I'd like to know is, if someone here'd be so *very* kind as to inform me—what necklace ? ” With eyebrows raised in supercilious inquiry she looked from one to the other and her grin broadened.

Peremptorily Cory said : “ Drop that—you know what necklace.”

“ Not me,” she said, “ I ain't seen no necklace—and let me tell you, I ain't got no necklace and never had, not like you're talking about. I never lost one and I never found one. And let me tell you too ”—her voice rose to its usual stridency—“ I never went into nobody's room uninvited, what's more I wouldn't go into one of them if I *was* invited, not if I was begged to, see ? All these blasted hypocrites here, they're just out to make trouble for me, they're trying to put it around that I'm a bad sort of woman, they're trying to make out I'm a thief,

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and for all I know it'll be a murderess before they've finished! They're trying to get me turned out, that's what they're doing. But I'm not going to stand it, see? I've stood all I'm going to stand. And if they're wise, some of them, they'll take this as a warning! They'd better leave me alone to go my own way in peace, not making trouble for nobody, or they'll find, if it's trouble they're after, that I can give them a whole lot of it!"

XI

IT WAS AT THIS POINT THAT KAY DISCOVERED THAT Inspector Cory possessed a savage temper, further that he had no objection whatsoever to raising his voice. A couple of minutes after Mrs. Flower had finished her speech faces were looking down over the banisters and the whole household knew what the trouble was about.

His attack of violence, however, got him nowhere. His shouting produced no changes in the replies he had already been given. Miss Lingard and Tovey sullenly stuck to it that neither of them had mentioned the pearl necklace to Mrs. Flower, while Mrs. Flower herself, with the same satisfied glint of mockery in her eyes, at intervals repeated that she had no pearl necklace, had never seen any pearl necklace and had never been into Kay's room.

Her admission in the afternoon that she had taken the necklace from Kay's room she explained as a joke.

"She got my temper up, walking up like that and accusing me to me face," she said acidly. "I'm not one to take that sort of thing lying down. But any fool could've told I was joking. You can take my place apart if you like and see if I've got any pearl necklace!"

Repeated questioning got no more out of her.

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When Cory asked her to explain how her perfume got into Kay's room she asked him if he himself had smelt it. "It's just her word against mine," she reminded him.

Eventually he gave it up and dismissed them all.

Kay was tired and went to bed immediately. But her thoughts could not leave the problems round which they had revolved all day; one after the other in weary rotation they came scratching at her mind, the problem of who the murderer was and why he had murdered, the problem of the pearl necklace and why it was important and why everyone was lying about it—for at least Tovey and Mrs. Flower had lied about it and perhaps Miss Lingard had too—the problem of Inspector Cory and whom he suspected, the problem of Charlie Boyce and his unexpected behaviour. To a drowsy mind that last problem was really as disturbing as any.

By the time Kay's eyes closed her thoughts were flowing into one another without quite forming; the questions were answered by images and the images faded and changed. Suddenly she found that she was engaged in a dream-conversation with Miss Lingard's mysterious uncle, Mr. Roote, who was sitting in a chair, still as a mummy, with a long grey face and clawlike yellow hands, and he was telling her on and on that you have to take things as you find them, that it's never any good worrying, that you never know anything about anybody, that you ought to keep yourself to yourself. . . . Later in the night Kay woke up again and realised that after all she had not stuffed the bell with paper. But before she could do anything about it she had fallen asleep once more and no bell-ringing disturbed her that night.

Next morning, however, trouble was waiting for her.

"Mrs. Bryant, Mrs. Bryant!" a voice kept calling.

Kay spent some confused moments thinking she was in the cottage with Patrick and that the girl who came round

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with the milk-float was calling under her window, then she realised that it was Pamela Fuller who was knocking on the partition-wall and calling insistently: "Mrs. Bryant, Mrs. Bryant, may I come in and talk to you?"

Getting out of bed, Kay put on her dressing-gown and let Pamela into her room. She glanced at the clock as she did so; it was nine o'clock. She wondered why Pamela was not at work already.

Pamela, of her own accord, explained that as soon as she came in. "I've rung up the office and told them that I can't come. I've told them that I'm involved in a murder and that I feel ill. They sounded a bit tart about it, but one of the advantages of working for this charitable crowd is that they simply have to overflow with the milk of human kindness, even with their employees. So I've got a day off." Wrapping her voluminous masculine dressing-gown around her, she sat down. "Got a cigarette by any chance?" she asked hopefully.

Kay found a packet and handed it to her. "D'you mind if I start getting breakfast while we talk?" she asked. "I've only just woken up." Going into the kitchen she put the kettle on the stove. "Well?" she called out. "What is it?"

Pamela came to stand in the doorway. "I'd rather not shout about it—it's something that probably ought to stay extremely confidential," she said. "The fact is, I badly want your advice."

"Then do let me advise you to think twice before asking for it," Kay said as she cut a couple of slices of bread. "Handing out wise counsels isn't my speciality at all."

"No? I should have thought you were the calm sort of person that people often want to discuss things with," said Pamela, propping a plump shoulder against the door-post.

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"If they do get that idea into their heads," said Kay, "I try to explain their mistake to them."

"But you've so much detachment."

"Only because I've found out I don't really understand much about people and so it's best if I don't get mixed up with them more than I can help. Have you had any breakfast?"

"Yes, thanks—but I wouldn't mind another cup of coffee. Mrs. Bryant——"

"Why d'you keep calling me Mrs. Bryant?"

"Kay, then. Well, Kay——" Pamela puffed out a mouthful of smoke—"what I'd like to know is, what do you really know about Melissa Ivory?"

Turning the toast under the grill, Kay started putting cups and saucers on a tray.

"I've known her and Ted a good time," she answered.

"Known them intimately?"

"Moderately so. They were friends of Patrick's."

"I take it you noticed what I did yesterday in their flat. I mean——" Bringing a hand out of her dressing-gown pocket, Pamela suddenly held up a blue and white check duster.

"Good heavens," said Kay, looking sharply at Pamela's face, "whatever made you take it?"

"Didn't you notice it yesterday?"

"Of course I noticed it."

"Didn't you recognise it?"

"If you mean that it's more or less the same as the one that was wrapped round the revolver, yes, I do. But——"

"It happens to be *exactly* the same as the one that was wrapped around the revolver," Pamela broke in excitedly.

"Also exactly the same as almost every duster I've ever seen," said Kay. "Whatever made you bring it away?"

"I was wondering," said Pamela, "if I oughtn't to show it to the police."

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Kay took the toast out from under the grill. She was feeling startled and disturbed but had no intention of showing it. After a moment she remarked: "I wonder why people can't leave the police to do their own work."

"But that's just the point, you see—that's the very thing I wanted to discuss with you," said Pamela. "Ought I to show it to the police or not? I expect you noticed how annoyed Melissa seemed when Ted came in with the duster. She seemed really upset and furious about it and that started me thinking. You see, this duster's quite new, just like the other one was. I shouldn't think it's ever been washed, it's quite stiff still with dressing of some sort. Well, suppose she'd bought them both at the same time, not meaning, of course, to use one for wrapping up the revolver but just taking up the first thing that came to hand. Mind you, I'm not actually suggesting that Melissa's the murderer——"

"Oh, you're not?" said Kay drily.

"No, I just wanted to explore the logical possibilities of the idea. After all, it *is* somebody in this house, isn't it? We've got to face that. And so"—Pamela stuffed the duster back into her pocket—"so I thought I'd come and ask you what you thought. If you say there isn't a possibility of either of those two being guilty—from your personal knowledge of them, I mean—I'll just drop the whole matter."

"Why not drop it anyhow? I still don't understand," said Kay, "why you didn't simply leave the duster where it was instead of taking it."

"Beacuse I want this thing cleared 'up!" Pamela sounded nervous and distraught and though her pale, plump face remained phlegmatic, it had a strained and sagging look. "From the way that Melissa flared up about the duster I thought it might quite easily have done a convenient disappearance by the time any policeman

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arrived to take a look round. Well, I didn't think it ought to disappear."

"But that was just one of Melissa's attacks of——" Kay hesitated. "Well, I was going to call it an attack of conventionality but that doesn't quite fit. Really it's a sort of literal-mindedness. Dusters are for dusting and glass-cloths for drying glasses. And anyway, I know lots of other people who'd have been quite as upset as she was if you mixed up dusters and glass-cloths."

Pamela's sceptical look suggested she thought that people of that kind probably didn't live in Little Carberry Street.

Kay picked up the tray. "Let's go back to the sitting-room," she said.

As Pamela moved out of the doorway to let Kay pass through her plump face wore a sardonic look. "So you don't think it was either Ted or Melissa?"

"Well, you haven't suggested a motive so far," said Kay.

"How should I know about motives? I don't know anything about any of these people," said Pamela. "And it all happened before I got here anyhow. But the sexual motive's more than possible, isn't it? And isn't there some worry about their families finding out that they're living together? There's money involved, I believe."

"I doubt if it would drive either of them to murder, however."

"Well, then, there are the pearls. It's obvious they come into the picture somewhere." Standing squarely over Kay, Pamela looked belligerent and suspicious. "That policeman's so interested in them, and everyone's telling so many lies about them, they must come in somehow. My own belief is that Naomi found out something she wasn't meant to and so was put out of the way. Don't ask me what it was—I haven't any idea, except that the pearls come into it somehow. Suppose, though, there are jewel-thieves at work——"

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"Suppose there are, what has that got to do with Ted and Melissa?"

"But that's plain," said Pamela, taking the cup of coffee that Kay was holding out to her. "The most likely person in this house to be mixed up with thieves of any sort is Mrs. Flower, isn't it? But Mrs. Flower herself couldn't possibly be the organiser of anything; I've run into lots of her type and I know. Their cunning never runs more than one jump ahead of what they're at. They steal something out of somebody's room and forget that they're wearing scent—d'you see what I mean? That's the kind of thing they're always doing. But Mrs. Flower could be acting under orders—for all I know, she may even be the murderer, but if so it was under orders. Well"—Pamela's light-coloured eyes, fixed on Kay's, shone with what Kay took to be enjoyment of the situation—"who's the one who keeps up an absolutely futile struggle with Miss Lingard—and she must know it's futile—to get Mrs. Flower turned out of the house? Who won't let us forget for a moment how much she disapproves of Mrs. Flower? Nobody but your literal-minded friend, Melissa Ivory."

On that, draining her cup, putting it down and looking as if she had triumphantly proved something, Pamela made a somewhat theatrical exit, forgetting to close the door behind her. Wishing that she had never given her any coffee, never let her have one of her cigarettes, Kay got up, shut the door, sat down again, put her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands and attempted to do a little hard thinking. But her thinking was not about the duster or Melissa. It was all about Pamela Fuller.

But Kay had several things to do that morning and as it was already late she did not remain long sitting over her breakfast but got dressed, made her bed, washed up, then put on her coat, intending to go to the ironmonger's in

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Tib Street to order a new lock for her door. However, before she managed to get away, Inspector Cory and Sergeant Whitehead arrived, together with several policemen who seemed to have reasons for a continuous tramping up and down the staircase. Kay found herself being requested to make a formal statement of how she had spent the time between seven and ten o'clock on the night of Naomi's murder.

She had it all ready. It was, she said, at just about seven o'clock that she arrived home, feeling very ill, and had gone straight to bed. "It was 'flu," she explained, "and I was in bed nearly a week with it, but I'm afraid there's no one who can corroborate that it began on the Tuesday evening. Next morning I called Miss Ivory and she and Mr. Hay did shopping for me at intervals, but I didn't see anyone on the Tuesday evening itself."

"In bed nearly a week, were you?" Cory turned and exchanged one of his speaking looks with Sergeant Whitehead. "Nasty thing, 'flu. Had a touch of it myself just after Christmas. Pulls you down so, doesn't it? I don't suppose——" He paused. "I don't suppose you went out much straight after you got up, did you?"

"No," she answered, "not for a couple of days—except for quite a few minutes at a time."

"Quite—and just which day was it, if you can remember, that you got out of bed, and on which day did you first go out?"

"I got up on the Monday and I went out first on the Wednesday."

"And yet you're prepared to swear"—this time, when he paused, she realised that he was about to ask something of considerable importance—"and yet you're prepared to swear that all that week when you never left your room for more than a few minutes at a time, you never heard any sounds of hammering in the room next door?"

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"Ye-es," said Kay after a moment's hesitation.

"Careful now," he warned.

"Yes," she said more firmly, "I can swear it."

"You see the meaning of what you're saying, don't you?" he asked sharply.

She nodded without speaking.

Cory exchanged looks once more with the silent sergeant and the two of them departed.

By then the tramping up and down the staircase had ceased, but when Kay went downstairs she found there was still a knot of men, large and muscular, wearing rain-coats and felt hats, waiting in the hall. She was very thoughtful as she passed them and walked along towards the ironmonger's in Tib Street. She had indeed seen the meaning of what she had just told Cory and she wondered that she had not seen it before. Also she wondered if the murderer had seen it yet, and if not, how long it would take him to see it. . . .

The little ironmongery to which she was going was one of those shops which, although they exist so near the centre of London, are almost like village shops. It was from behind an astonishing erection of cooking-pots, coils of rope, tins of floor-polish, electric light bulbs, garden bulbs, packets of seeds, festoons of chamois leather and of blue and white dusters of an all too familiar pattern, saws and screwdrivers, that an old man in thick spectacles put out his head and promised to deal with Kay's lock as soon as he was able.

As Kay was leaving a packet of pansy seeds caught her eye. For a moment she toyed with the idea of buying it as a present for Inspector Cory's daughter, June. But reflecting that this might look too like an attempt to bribe the police, she abandoned the project, and turning various thoughts over in her mind, walked slowly home again.

She was thinking so hard, looking down at the ground

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as she went, that as she climbed the stairs to her flat she almost stumbled over a man who was sitting on the top step just outside her door, reading a newspaper. His face was hidden from her by the paper. But Kay had no need to wait until he lowered it to guess who it was. For only an instant she stood stock-still, then, continuing on her way past him, remarked colourlessly as she took the key out of her bag: "Hullo, Patrick."

XII

PATRICK BRYANT WAS A SLENDER, DELICATE-LOOKING man a year younger than Kay. The delicate look was deceptive; it came mostly from his fair colouring and light build, his high cheekbones which made his cheeks look hollow, and his gentle, quiet manner; in reality he had an excellent supply of vitality. Like the vitality of a child, it was restless and undirected, and also like a child's, though not so easy to forgive, was his artless selfishness. He had published two books of poems, and liked gardening, keeping bees and engaging the attention of a number of women. Fortunately for him he had a stable if small unearned income.

Following Kay into her room without saying anything, he took a rather wondering look round.

"Nice," he said softly—Patrick's voice was very pleasant—"awfully nice. Do you like living here?"

"I did until recently." Turning on him Kay gave him a hard stare. "Why are you here, Patrick?"

"I read of all the excitement in the papers and thought I'd better come and see if you were in difficulties." He crossed to the wall and stood looking at a drawing pinned up on the panelling. It was of two children, Little Car-

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berry Street type, listening to a barrel-organ. He looked at it with a faint air of surprise as if it were better than he had expected. "You aren't really the sort to get mixed up in a murder," he said.

"Thank you," said Kay, sitting down abruptly. "You're very kind. But I'm doing quite nicely."

"All the same"—he was still looking at the drawing—"if there's anything I can do, will you tell me?"

"Is that what you came here to say?"

He looked round at her and nodded.

Kay's forehead wrinkled and she did not reply for a moment. Then she said again: "You're very kind," but her tone was dubious.

"The whole thing sounds a nasty business," he said, starting a slow tour of the room, examining everything in it with quiet interest. "Is it correct that the murderer probably lives here in this house? The reports don't actually say so, but I sort of deduced it from the little they do say."

"It's a probability anyway," said Kay.

"And do you have to stay here?"

"I don't really know. I hadn't thought of moving."

"But mightn't it be a good idea?" He picked up a small Staffordshire dish that Kay used as an ash-tray. "Where did you get this?"

"Junk-shop round the corner. Patrick——" She was following his movements round the room with uneasy watchfulness. "Patrick, isn't there any other reason why you came, apart from this concern for my well-being?"

"Yes—I like seeing you." Putting the dish down he turned, leaning a shoulder against her bookcase. A trace of a smile on his face brought out all its charm. "I thought I'd be interested to see how you live. You really like it here, Kay?"

"Pretty well—forgetting the murder."

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"Good," he said softly, "I'm glad."

She let a little more friendliness creep into her tone as she asked: "How have you been getting along at the cottage?"

"Oh, all right," he said. "I've had 'flu."

"So have I."

"I've had it twice!"

"That's bad luck."

"It was hell," he said earnestly. He was always earnest, with a kind of solemn enthusiasm, about his illnesses! "I had horrible pains all over and my throat was so sore I could hardly swallow and my eyes watered all the time and I was sick too—and yet, d'you know, a most extraordinary thing"—the soft voice warmed with pride—"my temperature was never above normal!"

"Amazing!"

"It was—it really was. But look, Kay, about the murder——"

She checked him: "As I said, Patrick, I'm doing quite nicely. We've got a Detective Inspector who lives at Arnos Grove and has three little girls and likes poems about trees—what more could one want?"

"But you—are you involved in any way? You see, it's a *dangerous* thing to live in the same house as a murderer." There was reserved concern in his look as if he were aware of having no right to intrude on her even with thoughts for her welfare. Kay knew the look; she had often been very moved by it. "Couldn't you get out, Kay?" he urged.

"I imagine not. I don't think they'd let me." Then she laughed suddenly.

Patrick's eyes narrowed slightly. He hesitated then observed: "You've changed the way you do your hair."

Nodding, she told herself that now it was coming, now he would tell her the real reason for his visit, now he would tell her what he wanted from her. But she had a

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moment of wondering whether she might not be wrong, for Patrick only went on looking at her in his gentle and interested fashion, then started looking at books in the book-case, taking out one or two and flicking over the pages.

Doubtfully she tried to guess what was coming next. While she waited, watching the delicate movements of his hands as he fingered the books, she had time to wonder if she might not be misjudging him, if after all he might have come to see her for no other reason than to offer her his help.

From her knowledge of him she ought to have been more or less prepared for his next move, yet it took her by surprise. Suddenly crossing the room, pulling her to her feet, Patrick kissed her, then pushed her back into her chair and said: "I ought to have done that when I arrived, I never could talk to you when you just stared at me across the room." Then he went back to the bookshelves and the books. After a short silence, turning over some pages, he added: "Well, perhaps there *was* something I was thinking of asking you. Don't you think it might be a good idea, Kay, if you divorced me?"

There was only a very slight pause before she replied: "Anything you say, Patrick."

He turned his head quickly. "You really mean that?"

"Why not?"

"That's awfully nice of you," he told her warmly.

"You'll have to tell me how we can lay our hands on the money," she said. Her voice sounded normal, but in her mind an explosive mixture was forming of rage and relief. "Have you any particular object in view?"

"We—ell—yes, I rather want to get married."

"What—still to the same one?"

"N-no, not exactly the same one." He was apparently reading a poem in the book he was holding.

"Well, I'm quite willing if you can manage the costs."

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"I think we—I can do that. But, Kay. . . ." He seemed almost disturbed by her acquiescence, as if it had been too easy. "I suppose you wouldn't sooner that I did the job? I didn't really feel certain which you'd prefer and I know it's supposed to be the right thing for the woman to do it—only that means it'll have to be you who has all the unpleasant part of telling lies in court and——"

"Wait a minute," said Kay. She sat a little more upright. "Have there got to be any lies? Can't you simply let me have the evidence?"

"Oh, it's not that, it's just that you'll have to be so awfully careful that nothing comes out about this man Boyce, and you'll find that a nuisance, I expect. Of course you can try for the discretion of the court, but that sounds rather complicated——"

"Patrick," said Kay, "will you stop a moment? What on earth has Charlie Boyce to do with it?"

He gave her a troubled look.

"Listen," he said in his gentlest tone, "you mustn't think I mind about it. After all, you've a perfect right——"

"I should damn well think I have the right! But that's not what I'm talking about. I only want to know why you dragged Charlie Boyce in all of a sudden."

"Well. . . ." With his head tilted a little on one side as he studied her, he suddenly looked unsure of himself.

Kay went on coldly: "Who's been telling you what? I'm not having an affair with Charlie Boyce, as you seem to think. But who's been telling you that I am?"

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, it'll make things simpler, won't it?" said Patrick. "I thought you might object to the whole idea because of the way it would interfere with you, but now, it seems, that doesn't matter."

"What have you been told and by whom?" Kay insisted.

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"Actually I was told by Jill Ackroyd," said Patrick, "and she'd heard it from Melissa."

"Melissa!" Kay burst out laughing.

"She seems to have spoken as if it were generally taken for granted," said Patrick, beginning to sound peevish as if he were somehow disappointed in her.

"Oh well," said Kay, "perhaps it's understandable. It must all have come out of an abominable habit Charlie has of forgetting his key and arriving home at three in the morning and ringing my bell until I throw down my key to him so that he can get in. He then comes up here to return my key and generally seems to think it's a good idea to stay and talk. At first I was amused and used to let him. But that's all there is behind the rumour."

"And d'you mean to say that talking's all he ever thinks of doing when he gets up here?" There was startled incredulity in the question.

"Well, not the first time," Kay admitted, "but I took it that that was just his peculiar idea of courtesy. Anyway you can take it that there isn't any impediment to my divorcing you. And now don't you think it might be a good idea for you to go—otherwise you may find you've got mixed up in our murder too?"

He nodded but he made no show of moving. Kay guessed that unless she took a firm line he might stay where he was for the next couple of hours. He had always liked to talk to her. But his presence made her tense and nervous. She knew quite well that she had never been able to shake off the whole of his attraction for her, even when she was most angrily weary of their relationship. To have him near her was a distraction and a strain.

"Really," she said more abruptly, "I think you'd better go, Patrick."

Equably he replied: "Yes, of course. But I was just thinking——"

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“ Please ! ”

With a wry smile he got to his feet, saying quietly : “ All right, Kay.”

Perhaps he was actually intending to go ; she thought he was in a more subdued mood than usual and anxious in his way to please her. But at that moment the one interruption occurred that could have been counted upon to keep him. A tap on the door was followed by a man’s voice, asking : “ Kay, can I come in ? ” and it needed only a quick glance at Kay’s face to tell Patrick that the owner of the voice was Charlie Boyce. A sharp glint of curiosity, not unmingled with malice, lit up Patrick’s blue eyes, and leaning back against the bookcase as if he had not even been thinking of leaving, he waited for Kay to open the door.

As Kay introduced the two men to one another she decided that the best thing for her to do was to sit back and let them do the talking. She knew that this would present no difficulty to either. But she was not prepared for the scene that followed. She had not expected that each would show himself off as quite so overwhelmingly genial. They asked interested questions about one another’s work ; they discovered mutual acquaintances they soon learnt that both had had flu that winter and they shared their theories about the best ways of treating it ; both were certain that there would be a war by the autumn, that it would last from seven to ten years and destroy civilisation ; both, except for an odd word of concern from Patrick and a restrained nod of acknowledgment from Charlie, ignored the subject of murder.

It was an elevating spectacle. Never, thought Kay, listening in silence, had she seen such a display of distrust between two human beings. Yet in a way they liked one another ; that was obvious. But in the liking in each case was a wary, only half-recognised contempt which shaded off imperceptibly into antagonism. However,

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they seemed to be so engrossed in one another that when presently they decided to go out and have a drink together they almost forgot to invite Kay. But in the doorway Patrick looked back and said : " Coming ? "

" Thanks," she replied, " I wouldn't miss it for——"

At that instant a loud scream cut across the unfinished sentence.

As the three of them stiffened and stared at one another more screams rang out. They were wild and shrill with dreadful sobbing breaks in them. They were the sickening screams of mortal fear, sounding as if they could only be forced out of a human throat unconsciously. Somebody on a lower floor was nearly mad with terror.

Charlie started the race downstairs. Kay and Patrick followed. As they passed, doors opened and the rest of the household came crowding out. The screams came from the basement. Broken only by those sobbing gasps for breath, they went on and on ; the sound was hideous.

Suddenly someone on the ground-floor began screaming too. It was Mrs. Flower who came dashing out into the hall in her dressing-gown, holding her hands over her ears and shrieking as loudly as she could from the sheer contagion of hysteria. Charlie pushed her out of the way with some violence. Falling against the wall with her dressing-gown hanging open, showing her black underwear, she leant there shuddering and shrieking while Charlie, plunging past her into the evil-smelling darkness of the basement, himself let out a cry : " Great God ! "

Kay and Patrick came up close behind him.

One glimpse of what was before them was all that Kay could stand before throwing up an arm to hide her eyes. Later, an interminable ten seconds later, she lowered her arm again ; she forced herself to look. But as she did so her whole body tightened so that all of a sudden she realised that she could not breathe.

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On the floor in the doorway of the room before them lay Tovey the caretaker. His hair, his blood and his brains were a foully mixed, coagulated mass ; his features had been battered out of existence. Standing over him with dishevelled hair and the face of a maniac was Miss Lingard. It was Miss Lingard who was screaming while she clutched in one hand a hatchet, drenched in blood.

XIII

JUST BEFORE CHARLIE REACHED HER MISS LINGARD'S screaming ceased on a whimpering sound as if the last cry had been strangled in her throat, the hatchet fell out of her hand and she herself crumpled suddenly and dropped to the floor. She lay only a couple of feet away from the blood-spattered body of Tovey.

In a low voice Charlie said : " Get the police, somebody."

Someone on the stairs behind Kay hurried stumblingly away.

" We'd better get her out of here, hadn't we ? " Charlie went on, bending over Miss Lingard. " There's no need to leave her here till they come."

" Here," said Patrick, going forward, " I'll help."

But someone shouted then : " Don't you move her ! " Thrusting her way down past Pamela, Melissa and Kay, Mrs. Flower advanced threateningly on the two men. " You leave her just where she is so's the police can see for themselves who done it, or they'll be coming after me, saying it was me ! "

" But it couldn't have been Miss Lingard," Charlie said, touching one of Tovey's hands. " He's as stiff as a post and this blood's all dried. It must have happened hours ago."

" Don't you touch anything ! " said Mrs. Flower fiercely.

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"I won't have anything moved, it's all got to stay just how it is till that Cory gets here!" She was in a state of terror with lips trembling and eyes staring, but her fear had given her determination. "If you touch anything I'll——" Breaking her sentence off she bent, snatched up the hatchet and look round menacingly.

"You fool!" said Charlie. "Now everyone in the place will have their fingerprints on it."

She let it drop as if the sticky wooden handle had burnt her. It made a dull thud on the boards. "Well, don't any of you touch anything," she said sullenly.

Just behind Kay, Pamela muttered: "I'm going to be sick," and blundered off upstairs.

After a moment of uncertainty Kay followed her. She felt it was only too probable that she might be sick herself. Only Melissa, showing startled but intense interest, seemed able to take sudden death in her stride.

Kay had got as far as the hall when she met Ted and a flock of policemen pouring in at the front door. Standing out of their way until they had all tramped down into the basement, she continued upstairs. By the time she got to her room the feeling of sickness had passed off but she was glad to sit down, glad to shut her eyes and pretend that that helped to shut out the picture of the old caretaker's battered head and contorted body and the crazed, screaming little woman standing over him.

Now, of course, she realised, they could be certain that the pearl necklace meant something. Tovey had lied only too obviously when he said he could not remember where he had found it, and the murderer knew he had lied. Some time in the night the murderer had gone down into the basement, and Tovey, hearing him, had come to meet him. They had met in the doorway, perhaps they had talked, then the murderer had raised his hand and Tovey had fallen. . . .

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Kay stood up unsteadily. The feeling of sickness was coming on again. Fortunately at that moment Melissa appeared, cradling a bottle of whisky in one arm.

"Wouldn't you like some of this?" she said. "It's what I want—lots of it—quickly. And what about Pamela? Where is she, is she in her room?" Leaving Kay to help herself, she went off to find Pamela. They returned together, Pamela looking white and shaky with her freckles showing up harshly against the pallor of her skin. Her forehead was moist and her fingers were clutching and tearing at a handkerchief.

"Thanks," she said jerkily when Melissa handed her a glass of whisky. "Oh God, wasn't it awful? And—d'you know, once I thought of going to Spain. I wanted to be a nurse. . . . God, what a fool I am! I've never seen anything so horrible as that—never—and I feel as if I'd never be able to forget it!"

"What was Patrick doing here?" Melissa asked Kay as if that were much more interesting than the murder of the caretaker.

After a gulp of whisky, feeling steadier, Kay replied: "He came to condole with me for having got mixed up in a murder."

"Did he really? But that's what I call being really chivalrous," said Melissa, impressed and surprised as she always was by the appearance of any of the virtues, which she could never get into the way of expecting. "Oh—I meant to tell you, I think they're bringing Miss Lingard up here. You don't mind, do you? Ted and I were still in the middle of breakfast when the excitement started and the flat's still in a bit of a mess." As she spoke there was a sound of tramping on the stairs. "There they are now, I expect," she said. "They say we're all to stay put and not go out, so now Patrick's mixed up in a murder himself, isn't he? How d'you think he'll like that?"

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Before Kay could answer Pamela burst out : " Oh God, none of you seem to have any feelings ! You're only thrilled and excited. You don't care what happened to that poor girl, what she suffered—or that poor old man. Oh God "—she put her head in her hands—" who's going to be next, that's what I'd like to know ! Who's going to be next ? "

" Whew ! " said Melissa. " What horrible ideas you have. I think I'd better have another drink." She was reaching for the whisky when the tramping on the stairs reached the top landing and a tall policeman came in, carrying Miss Lingard.

Charlie, Ted and Patrick followed the policeman who laid Miss Lingard on the divan and went out again. There was silence in the room while the whisky was handed round. On the divan Miss Lingard lay with her eyes closed and her lips blue, making little twitching movements with her fingers.

Her condition made Pamela recapture her resolute air. Sitting down on the edge of the divan, she tried to force some whisky into Miss Lingard's mouth. The others seated themselves about the room. The silence lasted, and as if the thing they had just seen had in some way come between them, they avoided looking at one another. In the house there was the noise of a great deal of coming and going, of tramping backwards and forwards and doors opening and closing.

Suddenly below in Little Carberry Street an enormous voice announced that thousands now living would never die.

As the handful of mortals gathered in Kay's bed-sitting-room stirred restlessly, the voice, an incredible voice, so huge, so resonant that it could scarcely be believed to come from a human throat, continued with some interesting information about the Day of Judgment. Patrick got up and

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looked out of the window. None of the others showed much interest. Close though the voice was in itself to a miracle, they were all accustomed to it. It issued through the mouth of an elderly man with a bald head who had just taken up a stand on the pavement opposite with a small band of disciples and a piano on wheels. Using no loud-speaker but simply tilting his head back and speaking from the heart, he let that semi-miraculous voice shatter against the chimney-pots. His group consisted of two pale young men who looked cold, and a wispy, middle-aged woman. He had already acquired an audience of the children of Little Carberry Street who stood around him, staring at him with the devastatingly impersonal interest of childhood, ready to have their attention diverted at any moment by a dog-fight, an aeroplane or any of the neighbourhood's other distractions.

" 'And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit. . . ' "

In the doorway of Kay's room Inspector Cory exclaimed: "If that isn't just what we were needing!" He strode forward into the room. He had a dour, angry expression on his face. Looking round, he saw Patrick at the window. "Who may you be?" he snapped at him.

Kay replied: "My husband."

"Then what's he doing here?"

Reprovingly Ted put in: "Really, Inspector, you ask the oddest questions sometimes."

Patrick sat down beside Kay.

"I saw the news of your murder in the papers," he said, "and naturally came to see my wife."

"That your only reason?"

"Surely," said Patrick.

"When did you get here?"

"About three quarters of an hour ago."

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"Can you prove that?"

"I can prove that I was still in Somerset at seven o'clock this morning."

"If that's so, you're clear. Tovey was murdered during the night," said Cory. "I can't tell you just when it happened, but it was longer ago than seven. Now then, all of you, listen to me——"

"And furthermore," said the voice, "'I say unto you——'"

"Can't somebody shut that window?" snarled Cory.

Charlie moved to comply.

Grimly Cory went on: "Now listen to me! These two deaths, one of you will point out to me sooner or later, may not be connected. I know it—it's logically possible. But if it turns out to be the fact, I, for one, shall be very surprised. Tovey, I believe, knew more than was good for him about the murder of Naomi Smith. I believe he was killed for that reason. And since the murderer of the girl is almost certainly someone who lives in or has easy access to this house, I expect to find Tovey's murderer among you. Should the two deaths turn out not to be connected, then I agree that Tovey's murderer could easily have come in from outside. But, as I said, I believe they are connected. Tovey knew more than he told us about a certain necklace, either of real or of artificial pearls, picked up on this staircase yesterday. The necklace has since disappeared——"

"How d'you know it was picked up on the staircase?" Ted broke in. His voice sounded muffled for his hand was over his face, pulling his features about. "You've only got his word for it. But he wouldn't even tell whereabouts on the staircase he found it. I don't know what his game was, but he had one—he always had one. He was always lying and spying. I suspect myself he ran a quiet line in blackmail and if he produced that necklace it

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wasn't with any innocent idea of returning it to its owner. More likely it was to threaten her. And I do not believe"—he gave another frantic tug at his mouth and chin—"I do *not* believe he found it on the staircase."

"Oh Ted, you never believe anything," said Melissa disapprovingly. "I suppose you think it's scientific, but it isn't necessarily."

"I do believe," said Ted, "that he had that necklace in his possession before yesterday morning and that he produced it then for some motive of his own—God knows what, but I'm convinced it was something dirty and sinister."

"You may be right," said Cory. "It's a possibility I've taken into consideration."

"Oh, you have?" Ted looked as if he would have preferred to have had the idea all by himself.

"Even so," said Cory, "it merely lends support to the supposition that he knew more than was good for him. Now then, all of you, remember that I'm ready to suspect every single one of you, so don't any of you try to cut and run—you'll be stopped if you do. You may be interested to know, by the way, that Mrs Flower has just been arrested."

A questioning silence answered him.

In the street also there was suddenly silence. The preaching had just stopped, leaving for the moment a feeling of hollowness in the air of the March morning. But then the piano filled the emptiness and several thin voices started singing: "Oh, what a wonderful Saviour . . .!"

It was Pamela who put the blunt question: "What's she been arrested for?"

"She was trying to leave in a hurry," said Cory. "However, the charge on which we arrested her was that for some time she's been letting out her room for immoral purposes."

From the divan came a cry. With a swift, writhing movement, Miss Lingard sat bolt upright. The rouge on her cheeks suddenly ceased to stand out like a couple of

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penny stamps on a blank white envelope for a wave of colour surged over her face.

"*What* did you say she'd been doing?" she gasped in a tone of horror.

Cory repeated what Mrs. Flower had been doing.

Pain and distraction distorted Miss Lingard's features.

"Whyever didn't someone *tell* me about it?" she cried. "Oh, why was I never told? Of course I heard a certain amount of scandal about the woman, but then I hear scandal about everybody,"—she swept a sharp glance round the room—"yes, everybody! But that anything like *that* had been happening in my house. . . . Oh, I shall never get over the shame of it. I shall never feel I can show my face outside again. I shall have to wear a veil—yes, that's what I'll have to do, I shall have to wear a veil." With a moan she sank back upon the cushions.

Cory showed no emotion on hearing that Miss Lingard intended to hide her face from the world. That she had regained consciousness, however, seemed of some interest to him. He asked her shortly how she was feeling. Weak, she told him, very weak and ill. It had been such a terrible shock down there. That poor old Tovey. And now this hideous shame on top of it. "Never show my face again . . . wear a veil. . . ." The words came indistinctly through blue, quivering lips.

"D'you feel able yet to tell me how you came on the body?" Cory persisted.

"Oh, I'll never, never forget it," she whispered hoarsely, "never. . . . I've never seen anything so horrible. Lying there in his blood . . . I'd gone down to ask him if he really couldn't remember where he found those pearls, as you seemed so interested in them. I thought perhaps if I prompted him a little he'd remember. He wasn't really quite right in his poor old head, you see, he often mistook things or forgot things. He was the honestest old thing

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you could wish to meet but he did get in a muddle sometimes, all because of his poor old head. It was the war did it for him, you know—it was all the war. Some people didn't appreciate that, of course, and never showed any charity. But that's what people are like, you get to expect it. And if you want to know who I think did for him——" Flinging out a finger she pointed at Ted and Melissa. "That's who it was! That's them!"

In Little Carberry Street they were still singing: "'Oh, what a wonderful Saviour . . .!'" A few children had joined in, as they had joined in earlier with the barrel-organ.

Cory said gravely: "Do you seriously want to pursue this charge, Miss Lingard?"

Before she could reply Ted burst out angrily: "Oh, she was always hand-in-glove with the old man or made out that she was. My own belief is that he had a hold over her, otherwise I can't see why she should have put up with the way he used to abuse her."

"You appear, if you don't mind my saying so, not to have been on specially good terms with him yourself, Mr. Hay," said Cory.

"If that's meant as a question," said Charlie warningly, "I don't think you have to answer it, Ted."

"Thanks," said Ted, "but as I've said it already I may as well repeat it—I didn't like his snooping."

With her eyes closed Miss Lingard started to say: "Don't listen to him, there's not a word of truth——" But in the middle of her sentence Sergeant Whitehead walked in. From sounds that had been coming from Pamela's room for the last few minutes, Kay had concluded that the police were busy in there once more, and she had noticed that Pamela herself was much more concerned with these sounds than with the interrogation of Miss Lingard. Now, as Pamela saw what Sergeant Whitehead was holding, she half-rose from her chair, and reaching out

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her hand, opened her mouth to speak. Then she changed her mind, sat down again, folded her hands in her lap and closed her lips firmly.

The sergeant handed to the Inspector a blue and white check duster.

Cory said: "You found this in Miss Fuller's room?"

Preserving his usual silence, the sergeant nodded.

"Miss Fuller, is this yours?" asked Cory.

"No," she replied. She avoided looking at Melissa, who was staring at the duster with a bewildered frown.

"Whose is it then?" asked Cory.

"I'd sooner not answer. It isn't mine, that's all I can tell you," said Pamela.

"Does anyone else know whose duster this is?"

Melissa said nervously: "I think it's mine—that is, I think it's one I borrowed. But how it got into Miss Fuller's room——" She broke off, looking at Pamela with deep suspicion.

"Miss Fuller, how did this duster get into your room?" asked Cory.

"I—I borrowed it from Miss Ivory yesterday," said Pamela. "I wanted to do some cleaning up in my room—the gas-men had left things in a mess—and so I—I borrowed it."

"You, of course, know," said Cory, "that it's identical with the duster that was wrapped round the revolver found under your floor."

Evasively Pamela replied: "Well, it's rather like it anyway. I'm not sure if I could positively swear to its being exactly the same."

"It's identical." Cory looked at Sergeant Whitehead who nodded wordlessly. "Now, Miss Ivory, perhaps you'll tell me whom you borrowed it from."

Melissa was hesitating, still looking bewildered and suspicious, when Kay spoke up: "In case nobody's

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noticed, there's a pile of dusters exactly the same as this one in the little ironmonger's in Tib Street."

"Thanks, Mrs. Bryant." But Cory went on looking sternly at Melissa. "Well, Miss Ivory?"

Melissa seemed deeply uneasy. "Well, I borrowed it," she said defiantly, "weeks ago. Of course I ought to have returned it but I forgot about it. I'd have remembered some time and returned it—I should have really. I always return things I borrow sooner or later, and"—with a withering glance at Pamela—"I don't borrow things without asking if I may!"

"Miss Ivory," said Cory in a voice of dangerous calm, "I'm not interested in your views on the ethics of borrowing. I'm asking you simply—from whom did you borrow this duster?"

In Little Carberry Street the voice was inviting its hearers to attend services in some chapel nearby. "Next Sunday," the voice announced, "we have a gentleman who's come all the way from America and who preaches the Everlasting God of Hope in a very spirited style. . . ."

"Miss Ivory," said Cory furiously, "*from whom did you borrow this duster?*"

She shrugged her shoulders and seemed suddenly indifferent to the issue. "I borrowed it from Mrs. Bryant," she answered.

XIV

BUT AFTER ALL IT DID NOT SEEM TO LEAD TO ANYTHING. Kay admitted that the duster was hers and that she had lent it to Melissa who claimed to have borrowed it with the unexpected object of doing a little dusting. She had been talking to Kay in Kay's room, she said, and suddenly she had seen two or three new dusters on the

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table, and all at once it had come over her that she would like to do a little dusting. Kay had been perfectly willing to lend her the duster and had never asked for it to be returned.

"Wait," said Cory. "How many dusters did you say there were?"

Kay replied: "There were two. I bought two together. I lent one to Melissa and I mislaid the other. I don't know when I mislaid it, I only know it's gone." She tried to sound confident but her voice shook slightly. She could see Pamela looking at her with a sardonic glint in her eyes.

Cory did not press her to say why she had not mentioned the duster before; he knew why people do not mention things in a murder inquiry. But he gave a sigh and said: "If only you'd all realise . . ." and shook his head wearily.

Melissa said: "Anyway, I really don't believe any of us murdered Naomi. She was a nice person, after all, she really was. She let me hide in her room sometimes when Ted had his family visiting him—because when that happened, you see, the flat was supposed to be his and I wasn't supposed to exist in any significant way. Generally we took cover in Kay's room if one of us had an awkward visitor, but sometimes when she wasn't in we used to sit in Naomi's room."

"Oh," said Cory, "so Mr. Hay used to take cover in Miss Smith's room too, did he?"

With a groan, Ted clawed his features about in all directions. "Yes," he said, "yes, I did—once. And we discussed *The Ascent of F6*, we really did. It seemed to be the sort of thing she liked to talk about. And I didn't murder her."

"Was Miss Ivory being visited by her family on that occasion?" asked Cory.

"The Ivory family, the Lord be thanked," said Ted, "live in Cannes. They don't visit in Bloomsbury. On that occasion, if I remember rightly, the visitor was a school-friend with a still school-girlish mind."

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"In Cannes, eh?" said Cory, curiously interested. "Have they lived there long?"

"Now what on earth," said Melissa in exasperation, "has that got to do with anything? My mother's lived there for about ten years—since my father died, in fact. I've a sister who lives there with her."

"I see—thanks," said Cory.

Soon after that he left and the gathering in the bed-sitting-room melted away in silence.

The religious meeting in Little Carberry Street had also dispersed, the preacher and his party putting their shoulders to the piano and wheeling it away. On the vacated corner a number of children had started holding a service of their own, and a fat little girl in a dirty pinafore, who usually bullied the others into playing the games she wanted, was achieving a very creditable imitation of the baldheaded man. Fortunately she could not achieve the volume of his voice. The street, for the time being, was relatively quiet.

Kay lay down on the divan and shut her eyes. She was angry with herself about the duster; of course she ought to have told Cory about it at once. Now he might start suspecting her of God knows what. There was already that unlucky fact about the hammering. . . .

Patrick had stayed behind for a little after the others had left, then had gone in search of Cory to find out if he might return to his cottage. Kay hoped that he would be allowed to leave. His presence disturbed her far more than it comforted her. She thought what a calming thing it can be to be alone. Yet because, as she lay there, a vision of Tovey, a vision brutally distinct with hideous details, would keep forming in her mind, it was a relief when she heard Charlie's voice outside her door, asking quietly: "Kay, may I come in?"

As she went to open the door for him she remembered that he had come up to her room once already that morn-

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ing, but because he had found Patrick there had never told her what he had come to say. He came in now looking thoughtful and absentminded, and sitting down, went on smoking a cigarette without its seeming to occur to him that Kay might be expecting him to have any special reason for coming. He seemed simply to want to sit there and think. As she dropped back on to the divan Kay wondered why she had ever thought that there was any similarity between him and Patrick; there was a firmness, a tautness about Charlie's face that was missing from Patrick's. She left it to Charlie to start speaking. The quiet now, she felt, was rather pleasant.

When he did start it was abruptly. "Kay, how much do you know about Pamela Fuller?"

"I've known her just a week," said Kay, tired of that particular question.

"She says, doesn't she, that she never knew Naomi Smith?"

"Yes—she says so."

"How can we find out if that's true?"

There was a pause while Kay looked down frowningly at the floor. Then she said in a low voice: "As a matter of fact, that's a question I was asking myself earlier this morning."

Charlie dropped his voice still lower to match the softness of hers. "She says she lived in Guilford Street before she came here," he said. "D'you know the number of the house?"

"No, but I should think Miss Lingard does, and the police too, probably."

"But I don't suppose they'd tell us if she wouldn't herself."

"What do you want to know it for?"

"I'd like to do a little private investigating. I'd like to find out if perhaps Naomi didn't visit her in Guilford Street."

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"So you incline to think it's she who did the murder?"

"One of us did."

"But the pearls——"

"The pearls may have nothing to do with it."

Kay looked out bleakly at the rooftops and the clear, warm sky that shone above them this morning. She thought for a moment, then remarked: "I suppose you know the real reason why they arrested Mrs. Flower?"

"She was trying to make a get-away, wasn't she?" said Charlie. "But that may not mean much. People like her haven't much faith in the impartiality of the police and are liable to run for it if they come in contact with them."

Kay shook her head. "The Inspector told me something last night—he told me that among Mrs. Flower's regular clients are some jewel-thieves. Because of that the police have been leaving Mrs. Flower alone, to see if by watching her they could find where the stuff goes to. I asked Cory if he meant that she was a receiver, or a fence, or whatever it's called, and he answered that she was probably a link in a chain. He seemed to take it for granted that those pearls Tovey found were real—and on finding them, you see, Tovey was murdered. And Mrs. Flower, when she found that out, acted rather queerly and then tried to do a bolt."

"So you think," said Charlie, "she wasn't bolting from the police but from the murderer—because she also knew too much?" He thought it over. "D'you know what I'd like to know?" he said at last. "I'd like to know what Cory's motive was when he told you that."

"I suppose he thought it was bound to come out anyway," said Kay.

Charlie smiled. "You seem to take our Inspector for a simple sort of man, Kay. You're wrong, you know. He had a motive, a definite motive, for telling you that. However, I'd still like to know rather more than I do about

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Pamela Fuller. About that duster, for instance—what made her grab it ? ”

Kay told him of Pamela's visit to her that morning with the duster in her pocket, and of the explanation Pamela had given of why she had taken it from Melissa's room. “ And this is a queer thing,” she said, “ Pamela'd got it all worked out herself about the jewel-thieves. Simply from hearing about the pearls she'd guessed the whole set-up Cory told me about.”

“ She was about, wasn't she, when the revolver was found ? ” said Charlie. “ How did she act then ? ”

“ Surprised,” said Kay, “ as surprised as I was.”

“ Hadn't she anything to say about it ? ”

“ Oh, she wanted the men to leave it with her because it had been found in her room. She said that made it her responsibility. They wouldn't do it, of course, they were much too thrilled. And then when I started pointing out to her that she was making them suspicious of her motives she told me she was trying to keep clear of the police because she was anxious to live down her revolutionary past. She was very serious about it ; she even thought the revolver might have been put in her room by the police as a way of getting her into trouble.”

“ That,” said Charlie, “ is really very interesting.” He stared at the wall between Kay's room and Pamela's, as if he were attempting to see through it into Pamela's mind. “ By the way,” he said next, “ where's that husband of yours got to ? ”

“ Making tracks for home,” she replied, “ if the police have allowed him to go.”

“ What did he come for ? ” But before she could reply Charlie added : “ Damn, I keep asking the wrong sort of questions, don't I ? Forget it, will you ? Here, have a cigarette.”

Kay reached for one. “ Thanks—as a matter of fact,

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Patrick's official reason for coming was to condole with me on having got mixed up in a murder. But his unofficial one, that's to say his real reason for coming, was that he's decided he wants me to divorce him."

"Are you going to?"

"Oh yes."

Charlie received the information without saying anything. Then, watching his own action carefully, he stubbed out the cigarette he had just lighted in the little Staffordshire dish on the mantelpiece. Then he rose, crossed the room, pulled Kay to her feet and started kissing her. He held her close to him and kissed her with long, steady kisses. After a while he asked: "D'you like my doing this?" And after a short interval said: "Your husband's a fool."

"But you and he seemed to like one another so much," Kay reminded him, laughing a little.

"So we did, so we did," he said. "I often like fools. And if he's a fool, he has sound ideas sometimes. Divorce is a sound idea."

Extricating herself and looking round feverishly for her cigarette, Kay said: "Probably it is, and as it's I who've got to do the divorcing I've got to behave with discretion. D'you know, Charlie, there are already some unfortunate stories around concerning your bell-ringing habits? Even Patrick had heard them."

Charlie laughed, and pulling her to him again, said: "Tell me something, Kay—tell me honestly—did you really pack the bell with paper last night?"

"Yes," she replied.

"You didn't."

"If you don't believe me, why d'you ask?"

"Well, did you?"

"No—but I shall to-night."

"I don't believe that either. There's nothing relentless

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about you really, it's all show. But who spread the stories ? ”

“Melissa. Her way of looking at things has its own sort of simplicity and directness.”

With a grin he said: “Nothing can happen in this house, it seems, without everyone knowing about it.”

“Except murder.”

The laughter was wiped off his face. Letting her go abruptly, he sat down again. A couple of deep lines appeared across his forehead. Speaking in quick, clipped sentences, he said: “All right, let's put the facts together, what we know of them. Let's see what we do know. Let's see if we can tie things up into a pattern of some sort. First of all, Naomi Smith arrives here from a parsonage in Oxfordshire. She wants to write and she has the odd idea that immuring herself in a back-bedroom in Little Carberry Street is the right way to set about doing it. She sits up there and apparently never has anything to do with anybody. She stays for a year and then she vanishes mysteriously. She tells me—isn't that right?—that she's going to France. I suppose she thought that would be even better for her writing than Little Carberry Street. But she doesn't get there, she turns up dead on Hampstead Heath instead. Meanwhile her room's been taken by a worthy-looking young woman engaged in good works. This young woman claims to know nothing about Naomi. After a week a revolver is found under her floor. It's been hidden there under a board which has been nailed down on top of it with three-inch nails—and yet you, you who've been stuck in here with 'flu since the very evening when Naomi was killed until the day when Miss Fuller moved in, never heard any sound of hammering. I suppose”—he looked at her hard—“I suppose you really never did hear any hammering, Kay ? ”

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"I did not."

"You see what that means, don't you?"

"Oh, you're speaking just like Cory!" cried Kay, suddenly nervous. "He arrived at exactly the same point this morning."

"He did, did he? Well then, assuming he thinks you were speaking the truth, what he's no doubt decided is that the revolver was hidden in the room *after* Miss Fuller moved in. And that means that there's more than a possibility that it was Miss Fuller herself who put it there. Any comments?"

Kay gave him a long look. She found that in spite of the abruptness of his tone, his eyes were smiling. She swallowed and said: "I *hope* that's what he's decided. And I've several comments. First, if Mrs. Flower has a key to my room she may easily have one to Pamela's also. Second, Tovey may have a key too—after all, he was caretaker. Third, even if Pamela did know Naomi, what motive could she have had for murdering her?"

Charlie raised a quizzical eyebrow. "What about jealousy?"

"Any evidence?"

"None at all. But I'm going hunting for it. Look,"—he leant forward—"think of it this way. Suppose those two did know each other, suppose they were friends, suppose they'd been sufficiently passionate about it that they'd decided they ought to take some trouble to conceal it—well then, suppose Pamela discovers that Naomi's in love—with somebody else. It would be a serious shock for Pamela, wouldn't it? As serious as any such shock could be. And she isn't a mild, self-contained person; she's violent and explosive, anyone can see that."

"Yes, yes," Kay interrupted, "but why should she move into Naomi's room after it?"

"Perverted sentiment, remorse, wanting to identify herself with the person she'd killed—all sorts of reasons."

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Kay shook her head. "And what about the pearl necklace?"

"I don't see why that has to have anything to do with it," said Charlie.

"Except for the murder of Tovey."

"Even that might have nothing to do with the necklace. Alternatively it could, it just *could*, have nothing to do with the murder of Naomi."

"Meaning we've two murderers in the house instead of one—thanks!"

"But the Inspector himself," said Charlie, "said Tovey's murderer could have come in from outside."

"The Inspector himself," said a voice from the doorway, and Kay and Charlie, turning quickly, saw that the door was open and that Cory was standing there, looking in on them with a curious smile, "has just one comment to make on your very interesting theory, Mr. Boyce."

He walked forward. Neither of them had any idea how long he had been standing there.

"As you point out, if Mrs. Bryant has told us the truth when she said she never heard any hammering in the room next door, then the revolver must have been placed under the floor after Miss Fuller moved into the house. The strange thing is this, however—the revolver was found at one side of the fireplace. It was found in the very spot where the gas-tap would inevitably have been put when the gas-fire was installed—and everyone in the house seems to have known that Miss Fuller was having a gas-fire installed. . . . In other words, Mr. Boyce and Mrs. Bryant, if Mrs. Bryant is telling the truth about the hammering—I say, *if* she is telling the truth—then whoever put the revolver under the floor put it there knowing that it was bound to be found in a day or two, put it there, in short, *precisely in order that it should be found there.*"

XV

ON THE PAUSE THAT FOLLOWED THE INSPECTOR'S WORDS Kay became aware that Little Carberry Street was making its usual contribution to the conversation. For some minutes past a woman's tuneless voice had been dolorously singing of the men who done her wrong. Blurred and unintelligible, a mere grey wraith of music, like the lean, ragged woman herself who was drifting a few steps at a time up the middle of the street, the song drifted in at the windows, catching for an instant the attention of the three people in the bed-sitting-room. For an instant they all found themselves listening to it. Then with a slight movement of his head as if to jerk his mind back on to his business, Cory went on: "Mind you, I'm not trying to do any explaining. I'm not saying why somebody wanted that revolver to be found, and I'm not forgetting either that the notion that it was put there on purpose depends on whether or not Mrs. Bryant is telling us the truth when she says she never heard any hammering." He gave her one of his steady looks. "You're quite sure you want to stick to what you said about that?"

With a tightening of her lips, Kay nodded.

"By the way," said Cory, "I've told your husband he can go home to his cottage. His account of himself seems satisfactory. That's more than can be said for any of the rest of you."

"Oh," said Charlie, smiling, "haven't we been helpful, Inspector?"

"Well, you or Fate or something hasn't been helpful," said Cory. "There's not one of you who can simply be eliminated because you were spending the evening with some reasonable and reputable people whose word con-

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cerning your movements can be relied on. Tovey, it's true, had an alibi for a short part of the evening; he spent his customary half-hour in the 'Blue Pigeon.' There are a number of people who can swear to that. But what's the good of that? Tovey's dead."

"Have you any line on that yet?" Charlie asked.

"Maybe—maybe not."

"Thanks," said Charlie.

"Well, as I was saying," said Cory, "there isn't one of you whom I can simply cross off the list. Even Mr. Hay and Miss Ivory, whom you'd think might have been together just that evening so that they could alibi each other—not that we'd be able to pay too much attention to that—were amusing themselves separately. Incidentally, Mr. Hay comes nearest to giving us something we can check up on; he at least managed to tell us the story of the film he'd been to. But take Miss Ivory, take the story she's given us! She swears she spent the whole evening cutting out a—a pair of cami-knickers. Now I don't know much about these things but I've been on the telephone to the wife and she says it's just impossible. She says a dress or a coat maybe, but not a pair of cami-knickers. So what am I to make of that? If she wants to make up a story, why in God's name can't she make up a better one?"

"But I'm afraid you're slipping up there, Inspector," said Charlie, "it's an excellent story—in fact, it's even probably a true story."

"But my wife says——"

"Your wife," said Charlie, "probably knows all there is to know about cutting out cami-knickers and all sorts of other things. But Melissa Ivory doesn't. Further, your wife doesn't know Melissa."

"But a whole evening——"

"A whole evening's nothing at all. I once helped Melissa cut out a brassiere and a pair of panties. Don't

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think I know anything about cutting out, Inspector—I don't. But I was in there one evening while she was crawling around on the floor getting tied up in bits of silk and clouds of paper, spitting out revolting swear-words through a mouthful of pins, and after a while I couldn't stand it any longer and thought I'd see what'd happen if I took over. I argued that with printed instructions and the sort of map she had of where the pieces of paper ought to go even a novice should be able to make a job of it. Well, I managed all right; I wasn't very quick about it, but still I managed. And Melissa was pitifully grateful. She seemed to think I'd performed a miracle of engineering, logical deduction and artistic creation all rolled into one, and she's brought me her sewing problems ever since. Her trouble in life, you see, is an extreme literalness of mind, so if the faintest ambiguity exists in any instructions, if there's the most miniature loophole for misunderstanding, she finds herself utterly incapable of deciding which of the two meanings which she's somehow managed to divine where most people would think they'd got hold of a quite straightforward set of instructions, she ought to back. So she panics, she gets into a state of agonised self-distrust which results in mental paralysis, she——"

"Yes, yes," Cory interrupted, "that's all very well. But still, a whole evening!"

"Anyway, you could carry out a test," said Charlie. "You could present Melissa with some material and a pattern and stay and watch what happened."

"The Lord forbid," said Cory quickly. "However, if you're so certain it's possible—psychologically possible, as you might say——" He looked questioningly at Kay, who nodded. "In that case," said the Inspector, "I won't automatically count the story out, though it still won't do her much good as there wasn't any witness to the operation."

Kay, who had sat down at the table and was fiddling

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with a pencil, drawing odd shapes on a loose sheet of paper, looked up just then and remarked: "Talking of Mrs. Flower. . . ."

"Were we?" said Cory.

"Yesterday evening you were, if you remember, and you told us that you'd arrested her this morning. I don't think you've mentioned though if she's got any satisfactory alibi for the Tuesday evening."

"Well, she's offered us one, the one you'd expect," said Cory, "but I don't know that you could call that satisfactory. What made you ask, Mrs. Bryant?"

"Just interested," said Kay. "I like to know how we all stand. I expect you heard me telling Mr. Boyce just now about your suspicion that she's a receiver of stolen property."

"Maybe," he said, "maybe not."

"I hope it wasn't out of order on my part to tell him."

"I haven't any control whatever over anything you choose to tell anybody, Mrs. Bryant."

"In fact," said Charlie, "he'd never have told you if he hadn't expected you to hand it on, as I was explaining to you a few minutes ago. Inspector, may I ask you a question?"

"Fire ahead, Mr. Boyce."

"Have you told that same yarn about Mrs. Flower to Miss Fuller?"

The small fireside chair in which Cory had seated himself and which was a good deal too small for him, its arms pinching his muscular thighs, creaked as he tried to rearrange his bulk in it more comfortably.

"Have I told Miss Fuller that we suspect Mrs. Flower of being a receiver? No," he said, "I've not mentioned that to anyone but Mrs. Bryant."

"And you, Kay"—Charlie looked across at her—"you haven't told her?"

"I've told no one but you," she said.

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"You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Then Miss Fuller," muttered Charlie, "is a very shrewd young woman."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Cory, "if you mightn't be right, but just what's on your mind, Mr. Boyce."

"Only that this morning Miss Fuller came in here and gave Mrs. Bryant the very same explanation of things as you gave her last night."

"That's to say," said Kay, "that the mysterious pearl necklace which appeared and disappeared yesterday must be part of some jewel-thief's haul, and that Mrs. Flower was the person with the job of disposing of it, just as you told me."

"Only," said Charlie, "she'd got there by sheer deduction."

"Or guesswork," said Cory.

"Shrewd guesses," said Charlie.

Thoughtfully Cory agreed: "Yes, pretty shrewd guesses. Certainly that's interesting. Thank you for telling me."

"Would you care to tell me something in return?" asked Charlie.

Again the chair creaked as Charlie adjusted his weight.

Kay gave his answer for him: "Maybe—maybe not. Inspector, I hope you don't mind—I'm drawing a picture of you."

"Delighted, Mrs. Bryant." Cory kept his gaze on Charlie. "What is it you want to know, Mr. Boyce?"

"Have you any corroboration of Miss Fuller's statement that she and Naomi Smith were quite unknown to one another?"

"None at all. It's a difficult sort of thing to corroborate. It's much easier to prove that two people did know one another, But we've neither proof of that nor any proof that Miss Fuller's made a misstatement. Is it my profile you want, Mrs. Bryant," he went on, "or shall I turn round?"

I, Said the Fly

"We-ell, this isn't exactly a realistic portrait," she answered, busy with her pencil, "it's a bit on the symbolic side."

"Ah," he said, "modern stuff. Very interesting, I'm sure. May I take a look at it?"

"Just a minute."

With a good deal of impatience in his voice, Charlie persisted: "But are you taking any steps to make sure that Miss Fuller *hasn't* made a misstatement?"

"Naturally," said Cory. "But may I point something out? Suppose Miss Fuller did know Miss Smith, suppose she killed her, suppose she came here and took her room—God knows why she should do that, but suppose she did all the same—and suppose she concealed her weapon under the floor and then went and ordered a gas-fire to be installed. . . . Well, you see what I'm getting at? Why should she hide her gun in the one spot where the gas-fitters were bound to find it when they started laying the pipes? Bit of an odd thing to do, wouldn't it be?" He turned again. "What about letting me take a look now, Mrs. Bryant?"

But Kay's dark head was still bent over her drawing.

Charlie shrugged his shoulders irritably. "Aren't there murderers who give themselves away out of vanity? If that revolver hadn't been found the crime would have been almost a perfect one, wouldn't it? If you hadn't managed to identify the body you'd never have managed to produce a killer and the whole thing would soon have been dead and buried. Well, perhaps that would have been more than the murderer could have stood. But I'm not suggesting Miss Fuller's the murderer."

"Oh," said Cory in surprise, "you're not?"

"I'm only saying there's something curious about Miss Fuller's perspicacity in the matter of the jewels," said Charlie, "and that it would be interesting to know for certain that she'd never had any contact with Naomi Smith."

I, Said the Fly

Levering himself out of the little chair which clung to him as if it loved him, Cory replied: "I agree with you entirely." He crossed to the table. "Now let me look," he said.

Leaning back, Kay pushed her little scribble towards him.

For a moment Cory looked at it with an expression of naïve disappointment on his ruddy features. For it was not a portrait of himself at all. It was not even a caricature. Across three quarters of the torn sheet of paper was draped a delicate spider's web, and in the middle of the web was a spider, a solid, bulky spider which wore a bowler hat. That was all it was. It was simply a picture of a spider with a hat on.

Finally Cory gave a laugh and said: "Here—let me have that pencil a moment."

Kay pushed the pencil across to him. He bent and added a scribble of his own to a corner of the paper.

"There you are," he said, sliding it back to her. "Mind you, I can't draw, but you get the idea, don't you?"

What he had drawn was a fly, a very common or garden fly.

"Yes," said Kay in a low voice, "I—I think I get the idea."

"Well," he said, "I'll be getting along."

When he had gone, Charlie crossed the room, looked down at the drawing and burst out laughing.

"Not very original of the worthy Inspector," he remarked.

Without replying, Kay crumpled the paper and threw it at the waste-paper basket.

"I wonder which of us he thought he was drawing," said Charlie. "'Will you walk into my parlour . . .?'"

"No," said Kay quickly, "that's the wrong fly. I mean——" She stopped and her cheeks flushed suddenly.

I, Said the Fly

When Charlie pressed her to explain she only shook her head and frowned straight before her. Observing her narrowly, he saw that her eyes were very troubled.

XVI

THE SINGING OF THE OLD WOMAN HAD ALMOST FADED away by now. Only a faint little wave of melody lifted itself occasionally above the dull, steady hum of traffic. Turning towards the window, folding her arms on the sill, Kay leant her forehead against the glass and found that when she did that she could still see the old woman far down the street, a gaunt figure with hands clasped together as if in constant supplication for mercy. She moved along only a few steps at a time then unsteadily revolved on her own axis, looking up hopefully at the windows of the houses near her. There was sunshine in the street; it fell on a barrow heaped with pink and mauve tulips which a small man in a checked cap was pushing rapidly along beside the gutter, and it draped the figure of the old woman also with a light and warmth which made her seem only the more disconsolate.

Sighing, Kay was turning from the window again when Charlie's hands fell lightly on her shoulders. She heard him say softly: "Kay, don't worry so, this thing'll clear itself up."

She shrugged his hands away. Her face was set and hard. Standing up, she went to the cupboard and took her coat out of it.

"Come on," she said, "let's go and do a bit of detecting."

"Kay——" Charlie stopped her, drawing her towards him. "What's happened?"

I, Said the Fly

"I've had an idea."

"No—I mean, the Inspector does a bad drawing of a fly and you go all queer. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she said stiffly, "except murder."

"Mightn't it just possibly be a good idea to forget that for a little? Wouldn't you care to give a little attention to the fact that I'm in love with you?"

"Oh, don't you understand," she said desperately, "that fly. . . . And the hammering—the hammering I didn't hear. . . . What's the good of thinking about being in love when all that's hanging over us? Sometimes I get the feeling it's all make-believe and that we needn't really worry much about it, but then—then I remember that these things really happened, these horrible things, and somebody here did them and is going to get caught and have to pay for them. So don't let's talk about being in love until all this is over. Let's—just go out and do some detecting."

There was a pause, then Charlie said: "All right. Anything you say, Kay. Let's detect, let's detect till we bust. What's your idea?"

"I've thought of how we might be able to find out where Pamela used to live in Guilford Street."

"How?"

"Well, it struck me that probably she used to have her name next to her bell, and if her room hasn't been taken yet, or if the person who's taken it isn't a particularly methodical person who deals with things like that straight away, her name may still be there."

"And we're to go the whole way along Guilford Street, going up to every door, reading all the names?"

"It won't take so very long," said Kay. "Pamela came here with furniture so she must have been living in an unfurnished room, and as most of the houses at the Russell Square end are boarding-houses or hotels we can

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simply miss them out. Anyway, I'm going to try it. You needn't come if you don't want to."

"Oh, I'm coming." He followed her out on to the stairs. "What do we do about all the people who stand and stare at us because of our odd behaviour?"

"We can buy a packet of notepaper and push a sheet in at each door; it'll look as if we're delivering political pamphlets or advertisements."

"You think of everything!"

However, in that Charlie was wrong. Kay had not thought of everything. She had not thought that as she and Charlie emerged into Little Carberry Street and walked along, turning into Tib Street and crossing over towards the stationer's to buy the packet of notepaper, a man in a raincoat and bowler hat, smoking a cigarette, would step out from a doorway and follow about twenty paces behind them.

It was Charlie who pointed him out. "Do you happen to have noticed," he said just before they went into the stationer's, "that we're being followed?"

Kay took a look at the man in the raincoat. He had just stood still and was lighting a new cigarette from the stub of the old one. From behind his hands his eyes met hers placidly. He was not making any attempt to conceal the fact that he was following them.

"Police, I suppose, keeping an eye on us," she said.

"Want to go on with your scheme?"

"Why not?"

"He may not look on it favourably."

"But he's got no right to stop us."

"All right," said Charlie, "let's get on with it."

They began at the Gray's Inn Road corner of Guilford Street. Kay took one side of the street and Charlie the other. Going up to each doorway, they pushed a sheet of paper in at each letter-box and as they did so glanced over each name beside the row of bells. The man in the rain-

I, Said the Fly

coat, his hands in his pockets and his cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth, strolled along at his customary distance of twenty paces behind them.

It was some time before he developed any apparent curiosity concerning their activities, but at length, as Kay came down the steps from one of the doorways, he stopped her and said: "If I may ask, miss, what's that you're shoving in at all them houses?"

"Propaganda," said Kay promptly.

"What about?" he asked.

Kay hesitated, then said: "War."

"Hmm—think you can stop 'em—do you?"

"I didn't say that."

"Well, let me take a look at what you've got to say about it."

She handed him a sheet of notepaper. When he had taken a careful look at it he handed it back.

"Now that," he said, "is what I call really smart propaganda. Reckon I might think of joining your society myself." But as, stepping back, he motioned her to proceed, he wore a mildly bewildered look.

Kay and Charlie went on from door to door of every house in Guilford Street that had not been converted either into offices or a boarding-house or hotel. But they did not find the name of Pamela Fuller against any of the bells beside any of the doors. As they walked slowly back with their plain-clothes attendant at their heels, Kay said gloomily: "Sorry—I'm afraid after all it wasn't a good idea. Pamela may even never have had her name up; I don't think she's changed the Smith to Fuller yet at Number Ten."

"Got any other ideas?" asked Charlie, not without irony. She shook her head.

"Well, I have."

She looked at him questioningly.

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"Has it occurred to you," he said, "that wherever Naomi Smith spent those three days after she moved out she must have had luggage of some sort with her?"

"Yes, I suppose she must have," said Kay. "No, I hadn't thought of it."

"Even if she stored most of her things, she must have had a few clothes in a bag or something. Well then, the question is, what's become of them?"

"D'you think that Pamela . . . ?" She paused. "But she'd never keep them, surely."

"It might be worth looking into, mightn't it?" He dropped his voice lower as if the man behind them might hear him. "Suppose Naomi spent those three days with Pamela, as I suggested; suppose she left a small suit-case in Pamela's room; suppose then there was a quarrel and the murder. . . . True, if Pamela had any sense she'd have got rid of the suit-case instantly, but there's just a possibility that she didn't do anything of the sort and that the suit-case, or at least some of the things in it, are still in Pamela's possession. If we could spot something that you could be sure used to belong to Naomi—by the way, could you recognise any of her things?"

"Perhaps—but that means breaking into Pamela's room."

"Any objections?"

Kay considered it. "No, except that I don't know how to set about it."

"Neither do I, unless her door's anything like mine and then it's quite easy. I often have to break into my own flat when I forget my keys. Those old doors, you see, sometimes fit so loosely that the latch hardly grips, and then if you've got a flexible knife it's quite easy to press the spring back. Anyway, we'll look into the matter as soon as we get in."

"If," said Kay, "Pamela isn't there."

"If Pamela isn't there," he agreed.

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Pamela was not there. Yet, half an hour later, they were no nearer to discovering whether Pamela, contrary to her own statements, might not have had some acquaintance with Naomi Smith. For Pamela's door was not an old door at all ; it looked as if it had been there only a few years, and it fitted its frame with surprising exactitude while, newer still than the door, so new in fact that it could have been there only a matter of days, was a shiny, spring lock.

"Good Lord," Charlie exclaimed, looking at it, "when did that get there?"

From the way he turned on her Kay thought he must feel that she was in some way to blame.

"I don't know," she said, "I never noticed it before."

"Did Naomi have it fitted, or was it Pamela's bright idea?"

"I said, I don't know," said Kay. "I think it must be Pamela's doing, but I'm not sure."

"If it is Pamela's . . ."

"What?" asked Kay as he stopped.

"Look here," he said, abruptly changing the subject, "let's go and have some lunch. D'you realise it's nearly three o'clock? I'm so empty I could break in two. Detection's a grand game but I fancy it works better on a full stomach."

But Kay stood still. "You were going to say something about Pamela, Charlie."

"Oh," he replied, "I was just going to say that if that lock was fitted since Pamela moved into the house it narrows down still further the people who could have hidden the revolver. But it's main significance at the moment is that you and I will have to think out a new way of getting into her room—and I'm all for doing that over a plateful of food. Coming?"

With a sombre nod, Kay followed him downstairs. They went to a restaurant in the Gray's Inn Road where,

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because of the lateness of the hour, they were the only customers. The sight of food made Kay think for a moment that she was hungry, but though she began on some spaghetti with enthusiasm her hunger soon left her. Abandoning her helping, she ordered coffee. Charlie, however, ate the whole of his portion and followed it up with fritters. When he saw Kay's lack of appetite he remarked: "You're letting it get you down—that's bad, Kay." But he did not press her to eat or to do much talking and it was Kay who presently grew tired of the silence that had descended on them and who observed with sudden bitterness: "I don't think either of us is very much good at detecting!"

"Because we've had a minor set-back? But after all," said Charlie, "it's a rather interesting set-back. I'd like to know, I'd very much like to know, on exactly what day that lock was put in."

"You'd better ask Pamela herself," said Kay.

"No, you'd better do that. I don't think she likes me much," said Charlie seriously.

"Oh—doesn't she?"

He looked at her curiously. "What's the matter, Kay?"

"I don't like the implications of that new lock," she said. "You said just now it narrows down the number of people who could have hidden the revolver——"

"Well, doesn't it?"

She pursued a crumb of bread across the table with her finger-nail. "Of course it does. It has to be either Pamela or——"

"Or you—yes, I know," said Charlie. Then he corrected himself: "No, that's only if you're speaking the truth about not hearing any hammering during that week before Pamela arrived. But suppose you aren't telling the truth. . . ." He was watching her acutely. "You just might be covering up for someone."

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"I'm not."

His lips twitched faintly. "All right, you're not—and that brings us back to the fact that most likely it's Pamela and that we've got to find a way of getting into the room and looking through her things. It shouldn't be so awfully difficult."

Again they fell into a silence. While Kay went on supplying motive-power for breadcrumbs to travel across open spaces of soiled tablecloth, Charlie sat with his chin digging into his hands and his eyes fastened steadily on a wall-painting of Venice. Presently, with an air of dissatisfaction, he said: "I can think of a way of getting a few minutes clear in her room, but that's all."

"That's better than nothing," Kay replied.

"Well, think up some pretext then for going in and talking to her," he said. "When you've been in there a while I'll ring her bell downstairs and go away; she'll go down to answer it and as soon as she's out of the room you can get moving. You'll have as long as it takes her to get downstairs and up again."

"That certainly isn't very long," said Kay.

"Can you think of anything better?"

Frowningly pursuing her breadcrumbs, Kay tried to improve on the scheme while Charlie sat back and waited. A black-haired waitress, also waiting, let them see that she was impatient for them to go.

"No," said Kay after a while, "I can't think of anything else. Seems to me housebreaking's something that ought to be included in everyone's education, but since it wasn't a part of mine we'll have to use your idea. You could give me just a little longer, of course, by waylaying her on the stairs as she's going up again and keeping her in conversation for a few minutes."

"But I told you, I don't think she likes me."

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"Then try making her like you—or try making her think you're trying to make her like you."

He grinned. "Well, I'll do what I can." To the waitress's satisfaction he turned and beckoned for the bill, then he and Kay started homewards.

They had gone only a few yards when they were overtaken by Ted Hay. He was walking with long, jerky strides, his shoulders hunched and his hands deep in the pockets of an unexpectedly opulent-looking overcoat. In the street Ted always had a tendency to keep close to the sides of the houses as if for protection and had a furtively desperate look. If he did not actually talk to himself as he walked along there was something about him which suggested that he might start it at any minute. He was passing Kay and Charlie without having noticed them when something made him aware of them and he paused. Looking round cautiously, he said in Charlie's ear: "I'm being followed."

"So are we all," said Charlie reassuringly.

Ted's look was sceptical. "I really am," he said.

"And so are we," said Kay.

"Are you quite sure?" Ted asked anxiously.

"Perfectly sure," said Charlie.

"By what sort of person?"

"A bowler-hatted person in a raincoat."

Ted's face relaxed in relief. "Then that's all right—that's what mine's like too. And it means I *am* being followed. The fact is, I was afraid that just possibly I wasn't being followed at all and that the whole thing was my imagination. Really I was half-afraid to mention it in case you were sure it was fantastic."

"It isn't," said Charlie, "it's just the normal routine, I should think."

"I still don't like it," said Ted. "It gives me the most unpleasant feeling up my spine. By the way, I know. . . ."

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The rest of the sentence was drowned in the rattle of a huge furniture lorry passing within a few feet of them.

"What did you say?" asked Charlie.

"I said I know. . . ."

But a second lorry was following the first. Again the words were lost and Ted's features contracted in a look of agony. Noise always had a shattering effect on his nervous stability. With a wild and rather malignant look around him, he hunched his shoulders higher still and strode ahead. Kay and Charlie hurried to keep up with him.

As soon as comparative silence fell, filled only with the refined electrical sigh of a passing trolley-bus, Charlie tried again: "You were saying?"

At the top of his voice, as if he still had to compete with the thunder of the lorries, Ted bawled in Charlie's ear: "I said I know who did the murders!"

XVII

TWO WOMEN WHO HAD BEEN STANDING GAZING IN AT a window filled with trusses and elastic stockings found this statement even more interesting than the display of aids for their varicose veins. With open mouths they stared after him.

"Oh," said Charlie. After a little he thought of inquiring: "Who was it?"

"Wait till we get in," said Ted. "That man who's following me might hear and I'm damned if I'll do his job for him. Let him earn his pay himself." He hastened on with his swift, lurching stride, keeping well under the protective shadow of the buildings.

They went to Charlie's flat.

Of the four flats in the house it was by far the most

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attractive, the big sitting-room with its three sash windows reaching from floor to ceiling, each with its little balcony edged with wrought iron railings, having once been the drawing-room of the house. The panelling was still in good condition and the fireplace had the stately simplicity of the period. That Charlie earned a tolerable income was shown by furnishings of surprising elegance. There were long curtains of dull blue velvet, a soft, rich carpet over the whole floor, a bureau of old walnut, a slender-legged table, a few good chairs and a number of bookcases. Though Kay had been in the room before, it had never been for more than a few minutes, and to-day, glancing around as she settled herself in a corner of the couch, it struck her all over again how much she liked it.

Charlie brought a bottle of cointreau out of a cupboard.

As he handed Kay a glass he said: "If you're to go in for larceny shortly, this should help."

Ted caught only the word larceny and guessed mistakenly at the context. "Yes," he said, "the thefts—the jewel-thefts—are naturally the crux of the matter. Melissa inclines to a sexual murder, but that's mainly because the idea interests the girl more. Obviously it's the thefts that count. Naomi must have stumbled on to them somehow and compelled the murderer to put her out of the way. Tovey had to be killed because he was threatening the murderer."

"But who is the murderer?" Charlie moved across the room and sat down beside Kay, who, with her feet up on the comfortable couch and the first warmth of the cointreau trickling through her, suddenly had an agreeable feeling that it didn't matter much who the murderer was. She looked at Charlie and thought how attractive his profile was, how it looked younger and stronger and not nearly so lined as his full face.

Ted was replying: "Miss Lingard, without any doubt."

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"Miss Lingard?" said Charlie, as if the thought had never occurred to him.

Ted nodded.

"But how could a squit like Miss Lingard murder anybody?" asked Kay.

"Naomi wasn't so large herself," said Ted, "and revolvers are famous for evening out differences."

"But Tovey——"

"Perhaps," said Charlie, "she hypnotised him and then bashed him. I've often thought there was mesmeric power in those eyes of hers."

Ted frowned as if he felt that his idea was not being taken seriously. "I've thought this thing out," he said, "I'm not merely spreading rumours. It's what I suspected from the first and this morning I had a talk with the Inspector which made the whole thing fall into place. He told me about the fidelity of certain questionable characters to Mrs. Flower. . . . He's told you about that, hasn't he? Well, the obvious supposition is then that Mrs. Flower's a receiver of stolen goods. It's so obvious, so very obvious, that one could hardly fail to walk into the trap, and yet that's all it is—a trap. The conjurer makes you keep your eye on his right hand so that you don't bother about what his left hand's doing. If the police are concentrating on Mrs. Flower——"

"Wait!" Charlie interrupted with sudden excitement. "I see what you're getting at. Tovey!"

"Of course," said Ted, sounding slightly superior about it. "If the police are concentrating on Mrs. Flower they aren't going to bother about the fact that the men who visit her are all likely to be met by Tovey, snooping as usual at the top of his basement stairs, and to be able to slip him a package without even Mrs. Flower knowing anything about it."

"Now that is certainly an idea!" said Charlie,

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"You see, I always felt sure there was something behind that lurking and listening of Tovey's," said Ted, "and Miss Lingard's peculiar toleration of his abusiveness. Of course Tovey was the intermediary between the thieves and Miss Lingard—or possibly Mr. Roote, if he exists. It was Tovey, I think, who somehow gave the set-up away to Naomi; she took an interest in him, no doubt because she'd had it drummed into her by Miss Lingard that he was a 'character,' and she must have noticed something and let him realise that she'd noticed it. So Miss Lingard decided to murder her. She may have arranged a meeting with her, or perhaps just followed her around until she caught her at a convenient spot——"

"Wait a minute," said Charlie. "What about the three days, the mysterious three days the police are so interested in?"

"Probably Naomi spent them at an hotel," said Ted. "But I don't see that it matters. In any case, Miss Lingard murdered her, never expecting, after she'd taken the clothes and mutilated the face, that the body would be identified. And then when it had been, when the danger of discovery came a bit nearer home, Tovey decided this was the time to start getting rather more money out of Miss Lingard for his share in things. I always felt there was something queer about the way he produced that necklace; I suspected straight away it was a threat of some sort. Well, that's clearly what it was; producing the necklace in public was a way of informing Miss Lingard that he was capable of giving her away. It was he himself, of course, who got the necklace back from Kay's room. He was much the most likely person to have keys to all our locks. It was also he, I think, having a spare key, who hid the revolver in Pamela's room after Pamela moved in. However, all he got for his pains was a bash

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over the head with a hatchet. Incidentally, the fact that Miss Lingard 'discovered the body' next day doesn't mean she didn't do the murder—it's the sort of rather crude trick that would naturally appeal to her type of cunning mind. And letting us find her too with the hatchet in her hand, which would explain any fingerprints she might have left on it, that's in much the same tradition. To me there's no doubt at all that she's the killer."

As he stopped and sat back, Kay found that her thoughts, due to the warm contentment spread through her by the cointreau, were somewhat lacking in definition. She felt there were holes in Ted's theory but all the same she liked it; she liked it much better than any other theory she could think of. It would really be very pleasant if Miss Lingard turned out to be the murderer. Thoughtfully she observed: "There's something in it—yes, Ted, I think there's something in it."

But Charlie was quite sober. "I don't, I'm afraid," he said.

Ted looked at him irritably and suddenly Kay realised that Ted did not really believe in his theory himself. For some reason that made her feel frightened.

"You don't attempt to explain why Tovey should have hidden the gun in Pamela's room," said Charlie.

"Oh," said Ted, "that's simple. I ought to have mentioned it. He hid it there on purpose to have it found. He couldn't work his little trick of threatening until Miss Lingard realised that she was in some danger of discovery. As a matter of fact, it was understanding just that point, the puzzling point of why anyone should hide the revolver in that complicated fashion, which convinced me that I'd hit on the correct explanation."

"But there's something you seem not to know," said Charlie. "Tovey may have had a key to the lock that

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used to be on Pamela's door, but it's most unlikely that he's got a key to the one that's there now. Pamela appears to have had a lock fitted on to her door when she moved in."

"A little thing like a lock wouldn't worry a man like Tovey," said Ted, flipping the argument aside with a gesture of his hand.

"There weren't any signs of breaking in," said Charlie.

"Tovey would know how to break in without leaving signs."

"Ah," said Kay, "I've thought of something you haven't explained. The scent in my room. It was Mrs. Flower's scent."

"Tovey could have stolen it, or bought some just like it, couldn't he?" said Ted. "They'd been taking cover behind Mrs. Flower anyhow, so he'd naturally decide to cast suspicion on her—apart from the fact that it was judicious of him to conceal his own smell."

"I'm not convinced," said Charlie. "But it's an interesting theory, and that one point, the point that Tovey could have been in touch with the thieves quite as easily as Mrs. Flower, that, it seems to me, may turn out to be important. It doesn't conflict with a theory of my own which I'll tell you more about as soon as Kay and I have carried out a little test we're just about to make." He turned to Kay. "How are you feeling?"

As Kay got to her feet she found that the warm, agreeable feeling inside her made her look forward to the mild adventure of searching Pamela's room. Telling Charlie that if Pamela were not upstairs she would come back and let him know that the test must be postponed, but that if she did not come back he should ring Pamela's bell in about a quarter of an hour, she left the room and humming a tune softly to herself, wandered slowly up the stairs. She liked Ted's theory, she liked it very much.

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There was something wrong with it, of course ; there was some quite simple point which she was unable to concentrate upon at the moment but which would, she knew, upset the theory completely if only she could think of it. But still she liked it. She had almost reached Pamela's door before she realised that on the topmost step, reading a newspaper, just as she had found him that morning, Patrick was waiting for her. As she came level with him he stood up and linking his arm in hers said to her in an urgent whisper : " Kay, I know the whole thing now—I know who did the murder—and I've got to speak to you."

Reluctantly she stood still.

From Pamela's room came the sound of someone moving about, so Pamela was at home and Kay knew that Charlie's plan could have been put into execution straight away. But Patrick kept his arm in hers. His pale face looked intensely troubled. He repeated firmly : " I've got to speak to you."

She took him into her room. Remaining standing, she said : " Will it take long ? There's something I've got to do."

" Forget about it, whatever it is," he retorted. " There's only one thing for you to do and that's to come away with me."

In her astonishment she merely stared at him.

" Look, Kay," he said, still very serious and tense, laying his hands on her shoulders, " I understand the whole thing. I had lunch with Ted and Melissa and they told me the whole story from beginning to end. They gave me all the details—everything that's happened. Fortunately they didn't seem to understand what it all meant. They've each got some fly-brain theory and nearly came to blows because they couldn't agree about them, and I did what I could to encourage them both because I didn't want either of them to start following up

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the real implications of the story. That was as much as I could do at the time. But you can count on me, Kay"—his grip on her shoulders grew harder—"I swear you can count on me."

Puzzled, she said: "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, let's cut out all that," he replied impatiently. "We've got to think quickly. We've got to act. I can't believe the police don't know all about it already, it's all so obvious. But as they haven't taken any steps towards an arrest I suppose they haven't got any evidence, or not enough. If we act fast——"

"Patrick!" Her face had whitened. "Will you please say what you mean!"

"Oh God"—his impatience and a strange note of desperation made his soft voice grate—"I thought you and I would at least be able to talk straight! I know you've no use for me as a husband, but I did think you realised that you'd always be able to count on me if you were in trouble."

"But I'm not in trouble."

He gave a snort of irony.

"Well, not particularly, at any rate," she corrected herself.

"Is that so? My dear girl"—he gave her a shake—"you're in just about as deep as you can be. Don't deceive yourself. Anyone with an ounce of intelligence can see what happened."

"Patrick, I did *not* murder Naomi Smith, if that's what your ounce of intelligence is telling you," she said.

He sucked his breath in sharply between his teeth. Turning away from her, he started walking up and down the room. With one hand knotted into a fist he kept striking it against the open palm of his other hand while his lips moved as if he were muttering arguments to

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himself. His brows were drawn into a heavy frown. Suddenly he swung round on her again.

“Kay, please trust me! I’ll help you—I’ll do every damned thing I can! I do understand more or less how a thing like that can happen. I swear I do. I realise even in a way that it may be partly my fault. If our marriage had been different, if I’d been a bit different, if I’d managed to change some of my habits——”

She stamped her foot. “Will you stop it—will you talk sense! I’ve just told you, I didn’t murder Naomi. Why, good heavens”—a shaky laugh started but she managed to smother it—“I’ve never murdered anyone in my life!”

He shrugged his shoulders. “All right, stick to it if you think best—perhaps it’s wise of you. But listen to me all the same; listen to all the things there are against you. First of all——”

“At least don’t talk so loud,” she interrupted. “It’s awfully easy to overhear everything from next door.”

He dropped his voice. “First of all, Kay, it was obviously you who put the revolver under the floor. I don’t have to explain that, do I? You were up here by yourself, ill, for about a week before Pamela Fuller moved in, and you say you never heard any hammering. If that’s true then it simply has to be you or Pamela who hid the revolver. Nobody else can possibly have had any reason for hiding it in such a complicated place. I know one can make up theories about the caretaker having done it, or Miss Lingard—that’s Ted’s idea—but there’s too much fantasy about them and not enough common sense. No, looked at realistically without prejudice, it simply has to be you or Pamela.”

“Then why not Pamela?” Kay gave a wry smile. “I feel that prejudice must have got mixed up with your certainty that I did it.”

“Not a bit of it,” said Patrick, “though I don’t say that

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my understanding of you doesn't affect my way of looking at things. I know that with excessively restrained people like you, who often know next to nothing about their own feelings, emotion can suddenly explode and take control in a staggeringly distorted form. But let's not waste time." Impatience was mounting again in his tone. "My argument isn't based on your character, or Pamela's, or anything as intangible as that. It's based first on the fact that you two are the only ones who had any real opportunity to hide the revolver, and second, the place where the revolver was hidden. It was hidden in the one spot in the room where it was bound to be discovered when the gas-fire was put in. So if Pamela put it there, it would have had to be with the intention that it should be found. And that doesn't make sense. It just doesn't. I tried to convince myself she might be one of those murderers whose vanity doesn't let them get away with their crimes, the kind who want their cleverness recognised, who feel almost compelled to give themselves away. But I just couldn't manage to believe in it. And that meant that it had to be you, because you're the only person who could have put it there before there was any talk of putting in a gas-fire. You're the only person who could have put it in that particular spot intending that it should stay hidden."

As the soft, rapid sentences came to an end, Patrick anxiously watched their effect on her. But Kay was not looking at him any longer; with narrowed eyes she was looking out of the window, away over the roof-tops into the bright spring sky. Her fingers were shredding a scrap of paper into fragments.

As she did not speak he began again: "Kay——"

She stirred irritably and flung herself down in a chair.

"I told you," she said, "I didn't murder Naomi. And I didn't murder Tovey. And I don't know who did."

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"But, Kay—the facts!"

"They've got a mistake in them somewhere. For one thing——"

"Yes?" he said as she paused.

"Well, what motive had I? D'you suggest I've been getting myself mixed up with a gang of jewel-thieves?"

She saw a look of pained reasonableness appear on his face, a familiar look which meant that having driven her to the limit of her patience he was now going to show her how gently tolerant he could be.

"Whatever have jewel-thieves got to do with it? Why should there be any connection between them and the murder of that girl? Logically there just isn't any connection. A block of flats isn't an indivisible unity where anything that happens to any single person in it has an immediate effect on the lives of everyone else there. Do listen to me, Kay"—he leant forward and took hold of both her hands—"you're in danger, you really are, and you're being stupid about it. And you're wasting time with this argument when you ought to know you can trust me. If you'd come away with me——"

"What good would that do? And I shouldn't be allowed to leave. I'm afraid it's you who're being very stupid, Patrick." She drew her hands away and folded them in her lap. "You still haven't told me about my motive."

"Oh Lord——" He gave a groan. "Look, Kay, you haven't fooled anybody, everyone knows that you're in love with Boyce. And whatever you may believe about yourself, it's obvious that behind that sober face of yours you've got a jealous, excitable temperament. And Naomi had had a lover, hadn't she? And there are certain things which point pretty definitely to his having been Boyce."

"For instance?" Kay asked woodenly.

"Well, you told me yourself about his habit of forgetting his key and ringing your bell in the middle of the

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night to get you to let him in, and you told me that the first time he did that to you he followed it up by trying to make love to you. Well, who do you suppose let him in when he forgot his key while you were staying down at the cottage last month? Don't you think Naomi probably did it? And don't you think that someone like Naomi—going on what I've been told about her—might have made the mistake of taking him seriously when he started making love? She seems to have been shy and lonely and wanting to break loose and not quite knowing how to. And when you got back I suppose you found out about it somehow—she may even have told you about it——”

“And so I slaughtered her out of jealousy and bashed her face to bits!” There was more wonder on Kay's face than anger and as she continued there was genuine curiosity in her voice. “You didn't see that photograph of her, did you, Patrick? The mutilation was horrible, you know, quite horrible. And you think I did it. We've been married to each other and lived together four years and you seriously believe that I'm capable of such a thing. And of murdering Tovey too, I suppose, with my little hatchet! I really don't know”—she gave a bewildered laugh—“whether to be enraged or touched by your loyalty to such a monster.”

“Don't,” he said, patting her hand. “I've always realised you weren't the balanced kind of person you pretended to be. And living with me was altogether wrong for you. I know it did you a lot of harm. That's why—why I want to help. And then there's another thing. You were ill that night when it happened, weren't you? You were just starting a nasty attack of flu. You may have had a high temperature and been more or less delirious. I remember that time about three years ago when you ran a temperature of a hundred and two and tried to throw the reading-lamp at me. . . . Well, I should think

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it was probably something like that this time. It would explain, for one thing, your hiding the revolver in that elaborate way. It's just the kind of complicated, senseless action people perform when their minds are wandering. For all I know——" He checked himself suddenly. His eyes brightened with some new idea. "For all I know," he repeated softly, "you don't even remember any of it. My God—I believe that's what must have happened! You did it, Kay my poor darling, *and you don't know you did it!*"

XVIII

A BURST OF SLIGHTLY HYSTERICAL LAUGHTER WAS Kay's reply. It was a painful laugh and as soon as it had started she had a feeling of panic that she would not be able to stop it. But she was rescued from it, it was cut short, by the sharp shrilling of the bell. It rang twice which meant that it was for Pamela, not for her.

She jumped to her feet. "Heavens, I've been forgetting!"

Springing to the window, she leant out to signal to Charlie that the ringing had come too soon. But Charlie had already vanished. Pamela's door opened and closed and Pamela started downstairs to answer the bell.

Saying to Patrick: "Wait a minute!" Kay hurried down after her and rapping on Charlie's door, told him what had happened and that he must give her another fifteen minutes. As she returned to her room she turned over in her mind what would be best for her to say to Patrick.

She decided on gratitude. It was what he was expecting. He was rather too intelligent, she thought, to have any serious belief in his scheme of rescue; it was the gesture that was thrilling him at the moment.

When she reached her room she found him standing, ready to go, and before she could speak he greeted her

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with a look of concern and entreaty and said : " Well, are you coming, Kay ? "

" Of course not," she replied. Then she thought that she had not said that in the tone that she had intended to use. " Really, Patrick," she went on, making her voice sound gentler, " I do understand what you want to do for me. I do realise you want to help. But first, they'd never let me go, and second, I just didn't do it, I really didn't, I swear I didn't ! "

" Then tell me who else could have done it ? "

" I told you, I don't know."

" Did Boyce do it ? "

As she did not reply a hard little smile twisted Patrick's pleasant mouth.

" So you've been wondering about that yourself, have you ? " he said. " Poor Kay, that's difficult, isn't it ? That's very difficult. Only, you see, it won't work, because if you didn't put the revolver under the floor, you know who did. If Boyce did it, you're deliberately covering up for him—and that'll get you into almost as much trouble as if you did it yourself. Is that it, Kay ? " He gripped her again by the shoulders, but this time the grip was heavy and his fingers dug into her flesh. " Is that it ? Are you covering up for him ? "

" No," she said.

" You must be."

" I am not."

" Are you covering up for anybody ? "

" No."

" Will you swear that ? "

Wearily she answered : " I'll swear I didn't do either murder, I'll swear I don't know who did, I'll swear any damn thing if only you'll leave me in peace. There's something I want to do—something that may be important—and you're interrupting me. And if you don't mind my

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pointing it out, if you want me to be successful in divorcing you, you oughtn't to be hanging around here so much."

Patrick's hands dropped to his sides. He thrust them into his pockets. "I give up," he said. "I'll have to leave you to make your own mess of things. But if you need me, Kay—if there's ever anything I can do——"

"Yes, yes," she said.

"You do realise you can trust me, don't you?"

"I trust you, I rely on you, I believe in you, Patrick!"

He gave a helpless shrug of his shoulders and at last went out. When the sound of his footsteps had faded, Kay went out on to the landing and tapped at Pamela's door.

As soon as Pamela saw Kay she said: "Good, I've been wanting to talk to you."

She let her in and waved her to a chair.

The room was more orderly than it had been when Kay had last seen it. The hole in the floor had been boarded over, the gas-fire was in place and Pamela's belongings had begun to sort themselves out. Pamela herself, however, in shabby grey flannel slacks and a bulging hand-knitted jumper which ruthlessly accentuated all the soft or muscular bulges of her person, looked more ruffled and untidy than usual. She explained it: "I've been trying to get settled in. Silly thing to bother with now, I suppose, since I certainly shan't want to stay here after all this. You haven't got a cigarette, I suppose?"

Kay had had the foresight to bring some cigarettes with her.

"Thanks," said Pamela, flinging herself down on the bed. "I say, I'm tired, aren't you? It's no good pretending one can get one's mind off this horrible business for a single minute, and there's nothing like having one's thoughts grinding on and on and round and round the same thing and never getting anywhere for reducing one to a state of exhaustion. Just at the moment I've got the sort of feeling that I wish I'd never been born. Probably

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you're too sensible to go in for that sort of feeling, but all the same you must admit it would have saved one an awful lot of trouble."

"You said you've been wanting to talk to me," said Kay. Having failed to prepare any reason why she should come to seek out Pamela, she hoped this might fill the gap. "Was it anything special?"

"Yes," said Pamela, "It's about the one and only subject, murder. But I say, how d'you like my room now that I've got it a bit straighter? Of course I'm not artistic like you, besides, I never give a damn for my surroundings, but I think it's pretty nice really. Only now that I loathe the place like I do, it's a waste of time even unpacking. I shall move out the first moment they let me. It's just my cursed luck, getting mixed up in all this. You'd never believe the way bad luck follows me around in every damn thing I do." She puffed out some smoke on the gust of a heavy sigh. "Anyway, tidying up gives one something to do when one's beyond doing anything else with oneself. How do you like my curtains?"

Kay said she thought they were charming. They were a blue and white Indian print and except that Pamela had hemmed them unevenly really were attractive.

"They're new," said Pamela. "I got them specially for here. Bloody waste of money since I'm not staying. By the way"—she raised herself on an elbow—"did you come in to talk about anything in particular?"

Kay shook her head. "It just gets on my nerves, being by myself."

"Ah, I know the feeling. Should have thought you were too self-sufficient to be bothered by it though."

"You've got some odd ideas about me," said Kay. "What was it you were going to say to me?"

"Oh yes, about the murder. . . . But you might just give me some advice first, since I suppose you've got an

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eye for that sort of thing. I'm thinking of getting a new counterpane. Should it be the same as the curtains or would that be too much of that pattern in a small room like this ? ”

“ Too much, I think,” said Kay.

“ You think a plain blue would be better ? ”

Kay nodded. “ But if you're leaving——”

“ Yes, yes, of course.” Pamela threw herself back on the pillows again. “ The truth is, I don't really know if I shall move or not. I never know what I'm going to do. I never make up my mind reasonably about things in advance, I just go on chopping and changing and then do something silly on impulse. I expect I shall go, but I might find it too much trouble, since after all I am settled in now. Really I don't know. Moving's expensive and anyway I know my bad luck will just follow me, so what's the difference ? Still, I think I shall go.” She crossed one flannelled leg over the other and waved a foot up and down. “ Will you go or stay ? ”

“ I shall go.”

“ Where to ? ”

“ I haven't thought about that yet. But you were saying—— ? ”

“ Oh yes, that there was something I wanted to say to you. Well it's simply this,” said Pamela, “ I know who did the murders.”

Kay gave a sigh. “ Who doesn't ? ”

With a jerk Pamela sat up. Ash sprayed over her wrinkled jumper and the crumpled counterpane. “ You mean *you* know—— ? ”

“ No, I don't mean I know anything,” said Kay, “ I only mean that everyone I've talked to recently seems to know for certain who did the murders. But the knowledge of each leads to a different conclusion. I seem to be the only one who disclaims having any knowledge.”

“ Is that so ? ” said Pamela. Kay thought she seemed

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relieved. "You know nothing—nothing at all?" Her tone was ironic and suddenly she began to laugh. "But you know, Mrs. Bryant—I mean Kay—I wasn't going to ask you if you knew who the murderer was, I was only going to ask you if you were going to *admit* knowing who the murderer was?" And with a secretive smile she lay back again.

Unobtrusively Kay glanced at the watch on her wrist, wondering how soon Charlie would ring the bell. She felt nervous and taut, waiting for the job ahead of her. She had been glancing around the room, noting the drawers and cupboards, trying to make up her mind where to begin her search. But she knew that she would have to keep the conversation going for some minutes longer. Looking without much friendliness at the plump figure on the bed, she remarked: "I don't know who did the murder and I think there's only one person in the house who does know, and that's the murderer himself."

"Or herself."

"Or herself, of course. The English language has certain limitations."

Pamela chuckled. She almost winked at Kay. "Has it, indeed? You know, looking at you sitting there so quiet and reasonable and serious and saying things like 'The English language has certain limitations,' one'd never guess at all the things that must be stewing in your mind. But you needn't try taking me in, you know. It's not only that I know a thing or two about people—I've knocked around and had my eyes open more than most—but after all, it has to be you or me who knows about the hiding of the revolver, doesn't it? It was you who had the opportunity before I moved in, and it's me who's had it since. And I, strangely enough, know that it wasn't me. So what about it, my dear Mrs. Bryant—I mean Kay?"

With a smile Kay shrugged her shoulders. She had decided to start her search in the chest of drawers under

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the window. It had once been painted vermillion but now was chipped and scratched, with one of its glass handles missing.

As she did not reply, Pamela continued: "It's Melissa Ivory, of course, who did the murders. I hinted as much this morning. She's head of the jewel set-up—I'm convinced of that. She's obviously the most likely person. And she overdid her hatred of Mrs. Flower. And she was careless about the duster. And then that family of hers in Nice or Cannes or wherever they are—I wonder if they really exist. Anyhow they supply her with a grand pretext for going abroad pretty often to smuggle the jewels out of the country. But one of the main bits of evidence to my mind is that the murderer has to be someone whom you wouldn't give away. That's what I was really sounding you about this morning—whether, if it was Melissa, you'd hand her over. And I came to the conclusion that you wouldn't."

"I should without hesitation if I had evidence," said Kay.

"I don't think so," said Pamela.

"I don't think your theory's much good if my silence is the main thing it's based on," said Kay. "As I'm getting tired of saying, I don't know who did the murders."

"Then I do, I suppose? Or some mysterious person who took the trouble to break into my room to hide the revolver here after I'd moved in?" Pamela rolled her head from side to side on the pillows. "No, no, that won't do. D'you know that I had a new lock put on my door on the morning of the day I moved in? So there aren't any odd keys knocking about in the wrong people's hands, as there are to your door, and breaking in would have been quite a complicated business. I always have a new lock put on straight away when I move into a new place. I've done it ever since I had an unpleasant ex-

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perience with a man who'd been given a key to the room by its former occupant and thought I'd suit his purposes just as well as she had. Not that I flatter myself that such a thing is particularly likely to happen to me again, still I feel more comfortable with a new lock and I always have one fitted wherever I go. The time the police searched my room—d'you remember, I told you about it?—just about confirmed me in my habit. I don't like the thought that unauthorised people may be mucking my things about."

It was then that the bell rang.

Kay's hands tightened on the arms of her chair as she got ready to move the moment Pamela had gone.

Swinging herself off the bed, Pamela mumbled: "Two rings—hell, that's for me again." She crossed to the door. "I don't expect it's anything important," she added, "I shan't be a minute."

Kay sat tensely waiting. As soon as Pamela was about half-way down the first flight of stairs, she dived for the red chest of drawers.

It contained a jumble of clothing. Stockings, vests, jumpers and even dresses were jammed in in rumpled confusion. Even an old felt hat and a pair of sandshoes came to light as Kay's hands delved feverishly through drawer after drawer. She found scarves, powder-puffs, hair-grips, books, pamphlets, beads and bracelets, but nothing that struck her as being out of character with its supposed owner, nothing that brought to mind the neat and quiet Naomi rather than the tempestuous Pamela. Kay slammed the drawers shut and turned to the little writing-table.

Here she found things arranged in surprisingly orderly fashion. Letters answered and unanswered, bills and receipts, were in different pigeon-holes; notepaper, pens, pencils and paper-clips were tidily set out in the drawers.

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It looked as if Pamela believed in efficiency in anything that resembled the work in which she had been trained. But again there were no signs of Naomi. Snapping the lid of the bureau shut again, Kay turned, pausing in indecision between an old trunk in a corner of the room and a small cupboard by the bed.

At that moment she thought that she heard a step on the stairs.

Anyway, she thought, guiltily standing still, how could she possibly search the room properly in the few minutes which were all that she was allowed by Charlie's scheme? Short of laying her hands immediately on something which she could identify as Naomi's, she could not possibly have succeeded. She waited for the steps to continue. But perhaps she had been mistaken about them, for now she could not hear them. She moved towards the trunk and just then her eyes fell on something which she suddenly realised was incongruous in that room. Swiftly she turned back to the bureau and reached out a hand.

A voice spoke from the doorway: "Just let me see what you've got there, Mrs. Bryant."

XIX

THE VOICE WAS INSPECTOR CORY'S.

He advanced into the room, holding out his hand. Kay gave him what she had just taken from the shelf above the bureau. It was a Bible.

Without saying anything he turned it over in his hands. The book was bound in red imitation morocco and looked extremely new. The Inspector opened it, looked at the fly-leaf and then with a curious smile at Kay.

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"That was clever of you, Mrs. Bryant. What made you think of it?" As he spoke he held out the book so that she could see what was written in a small, precise handwriting at the top of the page: "To Pamela, with much love from Naomi."

Kay's heart beat faster as she saw it, but she answered evenly: "It was just that from what I know of Miss Fuller a Bible—that's to say, such a new-looking Bible—seemed a bit out of place in her room. I know that she did have what she called an attack of religion some time ago, before she got her attack of Marxism—and I know that lots of people who haven't any religion have Bibles and even read them—but it's such a new-looking Bible, and it was just that that caught my eye. I suddenly thought she wasn't the sort of person who'd probably have been buying a Bible recently, whereas Naomi might have. But it was just an odd idea, a shot in the dark."

"Not a bad one. Come in, Miss Fuller," he added, for his ear had caught the sound of heavy breathing on the landing, "I've got a question or two I'd like to ask you."

Snorting with fury, Pamela strode in. Ignoring Cory she advanced on Kay.

"Didn't I tell you I don't like people mucking my things about?" she cried. "I won't have it, d'you hear? Of course the police put you up to it so there's nothing I can do—they're always waiting for a chance to get at people like me—but by God, if ever I get a chance . . .!" Her short fingers curved threateningly. "If ever I get a chance, don't think I won't get back at you. Searching my room the moment I'm out of it! Don't think I can't see you've been searching. Look at that stocking hanging out of that drawer and that letter that's fallen out of my desk. I suppose you had it all arranged with ring-the-bell-and-run-away Cory!"

Cory started to speak, but Pamela, her pale face dis-

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torted, swung round on him: "All right, all right, I did know Naomi!" she cried. "She was my friend—and that Bible was hers, she gave it to me—and she did stay those three days with me! All right, she did, I'm telling you she did, she did! But I didn't kill her, d'you understand? I didn't kill her! She was my friend. . . . In God's name, why should I kill her when she was my best friend, my only friend? Why, why?" Her voice choked and throwing herself down on the bed, she buried her face in her arms and lay there, racked with sobs.

Cory waited a moment then took her by the shoulder.

"Come, Miss Fuller," he said.

He said it not without kindness but his face was grim.

Pamela tried to shrug his hand away, then went limp under its pressure. Gradually her weeping grew quieter.

"At least," Cory resumed, "you've been withholding vital evidence. The punishment for that can be a severe one."

"I'm not, I haven't been!" Pamela gave a deep sigh and sat up. "I don't know anything that's of any use to you and I just didn't want to get mixed up in it all. I've had enough trouble in my life, I don't want any more."

"Most of us think we've had more trouble than we deserve," said Cory with astonishing patience. "That doesn't exempt us from the law. You'd better stop this evasion and tell me everything you know. You are, I suppose you realise, in a very serious position."

Resting her damp cheek wearily on her hand, Pamela nodded despairingly. "Don't I know it—and isn't it just my luck?"

"I doubt if it's altogether luck," said Cory. "You admit having known Naomi Smith, you admit she spent the last three days of her life with you, you then moved into the room she had just vacated and the revolver that killed

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her was then found in this room. When that happened you attempted to make the gas-fitters leave the revolver in your care and you continued to deny that you had ever known the murdered girl—*continued*, mind you, for before there had been any talk of murder you'd already let everyone here assume that you and Miss Smith were not acquainted. Your position, I repeat, is serious."

Pamela flung up her head. "Then aren't you going to warn me that everything I say may be taken down and used in evidence against me?"

"You haven't got the phrase quite right," said Cory, "but I do so warn you. I'll add further that if you want to consult a lawyer before answering questions, you can do so."

She shook her head. "I'm not a murderess. Not that that'll help me if you want to fix this on me, but I don't believe in lawyers. No, I'll tell you everything I can and you'll find it won't help you at all. And let me tell you one thing straight away; when I moved in here I hadn't any idea that Naomi was dead. We'd said good-bye to each other and she'd gone away and I'd no more reason to think she might be dead than you'd have to jump to the conclusion your wife was dead if she'd just gone off for a holiday and you didn't hear from her for a day or two. I knew, of course, that this room would be empty and I was fed up with my old place and I actually told Naomi I was thinking of moving in here. That's all there is to all that."

"In that case, why didn't you mention to anyone that you were a friend of Miss Smith's?"

"Because . . ." She stopped. Rubbing her eyes with her handkerchief, she gave herself a moment for thought. When she dropped the handkerchief, holding it in a crumpled ball in one hand, her eyes between their swollen lids dwelt for an instant on Kay's face, and Kay, who was

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leaning back against the red chest of drawers, thought there was a glint of mockery in them. But she could not be sure of it for Pamela immediately looked back at Cory.

"Because I had a very good reason," said Pamela. "Naomi'd told me something—something I didn't quite understand and that I wanted to find out about. If I'd spread it around that I knew Naomi I shouldn't have been able to find out anything."

"Well," said Cory as she paused, "go on."

"It was about jewel-thieves."

He gave a slight nod.

"I suppose," she went on thoughtfully, "I'd better tell you about Naomi and myself, the way we came to be friends and so on. By the way, d'you happen to have a cigarette?" When Cory had supplied her with one she continued: "We met in my office about six months ago. Naomi turned up one day wanting to do some work for the refugees. She'd got a good deal of social conscience—part of her religious upbringing, you know—and was still quite naïve and earnest about it. We talked a good bit and I tried to enlighten her a little about what charity's really like—I mean, it's vanity and its intrigues and its grudges and its—oh well, it doesn't matter. It didn't do any good because Naomi was too simple and honest herself to be able to understand me. She'd never seen any of the seamy side of things. She was horribly lonely and disappointed and I suppose she needed an outlet for her emotions. She didn't like my attitude a bit and decided she ought to try and make me change it. She visited me a few days later and after that we used to meet pretty often and she tried to get me interested in religion again—that's why she gave me that Bible. In a queer way we never got very intimate, yet I got very fond of her. She was so serious and sincere and inside very passionate—

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I don't suppose you know what I mean. Usually she came to my room in Guilford Street, though actually I did come here once or twice, but didn't happen to meet anybody. Well, then, something happened to her—I didn't know what it was, but I could tell something was wrong. . . ."

Pamela's voice had grown hoarse ; the tears had started trickling again. She dabbed at them before she went on : "She'd told me she was thinking of going away, then one day—it was the Saturday, the day she left here—she turned up with a little suit-case, saying she was going to France for a while, but that she'd got to speak to me first. She wanted advice, she said. She was in a terrible state over something, and I never managed to make out the whole of it, but I made her stay the night with me, and in the end she actually stayed three days, then she insisted on going and we said good-bye. . . ." Again Pamela's shoulders started shaking and the words choked in her throat.

"What time was it when you saw her last?" asked Cory.

"It was in the lunch-hour," Pamela managed to reply. "I'd had to go to the office, of course, but we met for lunch in an A.B.C., then she set off for Victoria—she told me she was taking a train at two-something—and I went back to the office."

"And this thing that was worrying her?"

"Well, it was all to do with this jewel business. Somebody she'd liked and trusted, so she said, had turned out to be a crook. She refused to say who it was or how she'd found it out, but somebody, she told me, was in the power of a gang of jewel-thieves and was being forced by them to help them dispose of their takings—at least, she said, that was what she thought the explanation must be, because she simply couldn't believe that the person in question

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could be so evil as to be in the thing voluntarily." Pamela smiled wanly. "That's nothing to go on, you know, because Naomi refused to believe evil of anybody. Well, she wanted my advice as to what she ought to do. Ought she to go to the police with what she'd found out, or ought she to approach the person——"

"Wait a moment," said Cory. "This person—did she never let slip whether it was a man or a woman?"

"She was extremely careful not to—and that's what I'm trying to be so as not to give you a wrong impression of what she said. Well, as I was saying, she wanted to know whether she should go to the police or whether she should go to the person in question and try to make him—or her—see the light of sweet reason and get back on to the path of virtue. That, of course, was what she really wanted to do. But she was perplexed and quite a bit frightened and wanted to know what I thought."

"And may I ask what advice you gave her?"

"Me? I told her to do neither the one nor the other but to clear out and have a good holiday. I told her she was a fool to get herself mixed up in anything nasty when she could so easily keep clear of it."

"Following which excellent advice," said Cory sardonically, "you moved into the very midst of the nastiness yourself. That, Miss Fuller, is going to take a little explaining."

She tried to appear nonchalant. "That's different—I'm not a poor innocent like her. I know my way around a bit better than she did. But I admit I was a fool. Only who would ever have imagined. . . . ? Oh, but what the hell? It's done now."

"It's by no means done now," Cory reminded her sternly. "And you still haven't explained what made you move in here, knowing what you did?"

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"But isn't it obvious? I only knew half the story, you see. Until I'd unearthed the rest I couldn't do anything about it."

"Oh, you were intending to do something about it. were you, in spite of having advised Miss Smith to do nothing? Just what were you intending to do?"

"Tell the police, of course."

Cory's blunt features hardened. "Are you sure that the thought never crossed your mind that you might derive some slight profit from your knowledge? You would have found yourself in a powerful, if slightly dangerous position."

"What?"—Pamela's reddened eyes widened—"black-mail, d'you mean?"

"Just that."

She stared at him in a kind of terror which reminded Kay of the look she had seen on the face of Mrs. Flower that morning when she had stood in the passage in her dressing-gown and black underwear, screaming.

"If that's what you think," Pamela gasped at last, "I'm going to tell you what *I* think! I'm going to tell you who's the boss of this thieves' syndicate and who did the murders and who's covering up the murderer—and the last's what I'll tell you first. There she is!" She flung out a hand, pointing at Kay. "She knows who hid the gun in here!"

To her obvious annoyance, Cory did not seem much impressed. He answered negligently: "Yes, I know she does, and sooner or later I'll get it out of her. But to stick to your case, Miss Fuller, d'you realise that there's only one reason, in face of all the evidence against you, why I don't have you arrested immediately for the murder of Naomi Smith? That reason is the precise spot where the revolver was found. You of all people would have realised that hiding it there would lead to its immediate

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discovery—and I don't think that makes sense. But apart from that——”

“But—but——” Pamela burst out indignantly, “but you know, you say you *know* that Mrs. Bryant knows. . . . And then you keep on at me! Why don't you question her?”

“Because I like to deal with one thing at a time,” said Cory. “You've just been clearing up several points of considerable importance. I shall want you to sign a written statement covering what you've told me.”

“All right,” said Pamela sullenly, “but why, why don't you start on her?”

Kay was wondering the same thing. With a mounting sense of panic she had been watching the strong, hard line of Cory's profile, listening to his stolid speech. She had felt her throat growing dry and her heart knocking at her ribs. His indifference to her, his continued concentration on Pamela, were beginning to feel almost unendurable.

“Yes, why don't you start on me?” she demanded jerkily. “If you're so sure I know who did the murder——”

“Just a minute.” He did not look round at her. He had started writing in his note-book, jotting down a few words, pausing, frowning at them, then jotting a few more, proceeding with maddening slowness. At length, still looking at his note-book and without particularly addressing either of them, he observed: “I'm almost certain the revolver was hidden in this room before Miss Fuller moved into it. But that means it was done while Mrs. Bryant was in the next room, ill with flu. If she would admit having heard hammering in here I should conclude it was at least possible that she didn't know who the murderer was. After all, there's nothing specially suspicious about hammering in a room that's being redecorated. If I'd been ill in bed with flu and had heard

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hammering in here I shouldn't have dreamt of getting out of bed to investigate ; I'd just have blocked my ears and prayed it wouldn't go on too long. But Mrs. Bryant says stubbornly that she never heard any hammering, and that makes me certain she's lying. Either she knows who did the murders, or else just possibly—I say, just possibly—she did them herself.” He added a few more words at the bottom of a page, closed the note-book with a snap, thrust it into a pocket and started for the door.

“Wait,” cried Kay in consternation, “you're not going ?”

With a hand on the door he paused and looked round at her. “Not if you've anything to tell me, naturally. But if you still can't make up your mind to tell me what you know, as Miss Fuller's so wisely done, I don't see why I should waste my time.”

“I've got one thing to tell you—it's something Miss Fuller might have remembered if she'd wanted to,” said Kay. “It was I who suggested that she might have a gas-fire put in here.”

Cory's eyebrows shot up. He turned on Pamela.

“Is that true ?”

“Why yes—yes, it's perfectly true. I'd forgotten. . . .” With wrinkled brows, as if she could not understand the implications of this fact, Pamela looked in worried silence at Kay.

Kay, without saying any more, turned to the window. On the backyard walls the cats of Bloomsbury were sunning themselves in dozens ; here and there washing fluttered in the breeze.

“When did this happen ?” asked Cory.

Kay let Pamela answer. “It was when I came to look over the flat,” she said uneasily. “I knocked Mrs. Bryant up to ask her what sort of place this was to live in—whether the other people were easy to get on with and so

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on. She was in bed. When I looked in I saw the gas-fire and said that was the only thing I didn't like about this room, that there wasn't any gas or electric fire, and she said I could probably get Miss Lingard to put one in for me if I took the room. I said it was a good idea and that I'd see about it immediately."

"I see," said Cory thoughtfully. "So Mrs. Bryant knew the floor was going to be taken up. What day did this happen?"

"On the Wednesday," said Pamela.

"The day after the murder?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Bryant——"

But Kay did not learn what he was meaning to say to her for hurried trampling on the stairs and shouts from below interrupted him. Sergeant Whitehead and two other men thrust their way into the room. One of these told Cory tersely that they had just found a hoard of jewellery hidden under the floor in Tovey's basement.

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CORY AND THE THREE MEN DEPARTED. NOTHING was said to Kay and Pamela as to whether they were to remain where they were or whether they might leave. They looked doubtfully at one another. Then, though they did not speak, both made for the door and went downstairs after the policemen. They reached the ground-floor without meeting any interference, but in the hall a large individual who looked rather like Sergeant Whitehead but who was possessed of the power of speech,

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curtly informed them that their presence was not required in the basement. They turned back. Pamela went up to her room again but Kay stopped at the first floor and went into Charlie's flat.

Charlie and Ted were still there and Melissa had joined them.

"Well, did you find anything?" Charlie asked.

Kay told them what had happened.

When she had finished Charlie burst out excitedly: "But that gives Pamela a much better motive than I'd thought of. With Naomi and her conscience out of the way she could simply cash in on her knowledge."

"But d'you think she knows who's behind the jewel business?" asked Melissa.

"I think perhaps she does," said Kay.

"Who does she think it is?"

"She says she thinks it's you."

"She doesn't!" Melissa let out a slow breath. A smile of deep satisfaction spread over her face. "Good Lord, think of that!" she murmured wonderingly. "The damned little liar!" she added.

"That's just it," said Kay. "I'm afraid the lie's too obvious. Her case against you rests chiefly on your dislike of Mrs. Flower and your objection to having dusters used as glass-cloths."

"There you are, ducks," said Ted, patting Melissa's knee, "she just doesn't understand what a hygienic soul you are. All the same, Kay, wouldn't you say the young person upstairs has a sort of incoherence about her in general?"

"But she's not really a fool," said Kay.

"Yes, I think that's the point," said Charlie. "She moved in here almost certainly with the object of making something out of blackmail. She's picked on Melissa as the criminal in order to hide her knowledge, or at least her suspicion, of whom it actually is."

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"Ted," said Melissa in an audible whisper, "these two seem to take it for granted it isn't me. Is that rude of them or should I be pleased about it?"

"Just a bit of both, I fancy. And now," said Ted, "what's all this about jewels in the basement?"

"We'll have to wait and see what Cory'll tell us," said Kay.

They did not, however, have to wait very long, for it was only five minutes later that Inspector Cory appeared, accompanied by Sergeant Whitehead who was carrying a small bundle wrapped up in a large dirty handkerchief. At a gesture from Cory the sergeant put the bundle down on the table and opened it up. Inside there was a flash of gold, a glittering of reds and blues and greens, the glow of opals and the creamy sheen of little seed pearls. Rings, bracelets, chains and pendants were jumbled there in a knotted mass.

As Kay, Charlie, Ted and Melissa crowded round the table, Cory said sharply: "Don't touch, please!"

They bent their heads over the pile of jewellery.

It was Melissa who broke the interested silence: "But—but none of this is valuable, is it?"

Cory smiled grimly. "Just so, Miss Ivory. There's nothing here worth more than two or three pounds at most. The stones are genuine but inferior. I'm inclined to think that these are merely the unimportant left-overs of several hauls, pieces which perhaps were only treasured by their owners for sentimental reasons or something of that sort."

"I've got a hideous bracelet exactly like that one there which I inherited from my Grandaunt Sophia, and it isn't worth thirty shillings," said Melissa.

"Where did you find these things, Inspector?" asked Charlie.

"Under a loose board in Tovey's room," said Cory. "A

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loose board, notice. The revolver was hidden under a board nailed down with three-inch nails, but these were merely tucked away under a loose board."

Straightening suddenly, Charlie said: "Inspector, I'm going to ask you for all our sakes to search this house from top to bottom!"

"Thank you, Mr. Boyce, but I don't think it's necessary," Cory replied unenthusiastically. "The other jewels, the ones of value, have probably been got rid of long since. And I fancy the string of pearls have been got rid of too."

Charlie shrugged his shoulders.

Ted put in: "These things here at least support my theory that Tovey, not Mrs. Flower, was the fence."

"Ah," said Cory, "you'd thought of that, had you?"

"You mean," said Ted, regarding the Inspector with definite dislike, "that *you* had too?"

"You're so *stupid*, Ted," said Melissa, "the Inspector thinks of *everything*."

"You may be interested to know," said Cory, "that Mrs. Flower has spent the whole time since we arrested her this morning accusing Tovey. She also keeps thanking us for arresting her. She says she feels safer in jail than she would now in this house. She says she was running away only to save herself from being the next one on the murderer's list."

"Not a nice woman," murmured Ted. "She has the nastiest thoughts in her mind. D'you think there's going to be a next one, Inspector?"

In the way that Cory responded to this question, which had been put flippantly enough even if real anxiety lurked behind it, there was evidence of something which Kay had suspected ever since Cory had taken her pencil from her and added his drawing of a fly to her drawing of a spider; the big man, stolid though he seemed, had an

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undoubted love of the dramatic. He had some skill in it too. After Ted's question he let a silence settled and deepen. He let it lengthen out, grow tense and stifling. Then he pretended he had simply never heard the question and in the most casual way possible inquired: "By the way, where's Miss Fuller?"

Kay had just replied that, so far as she knew, Pamela was upstairs in her room when a policeman looked in and beckoned to Cory. They whispered together at the door and Kay saw Cory nod. The policeman departed. After a minute they heard the sound of Miss Lingard's loose-fitting, high-heeled shoes on the stairs. She came in, her face rather paler than usual so that the patches of rouge on her cheeks stood out like pink patches of the British Empire on a map of the world. Cory led her at once to a chair. Ted muttered: "She hasn't got that veil yet." Miss Lingard seemed more collected than she had been in the morning, but her bony, worn little hands soon started twisting around and writhing and plucking at each other.

"I want to say," she began hoarsely, "I just don't believe a word of it. They've been telling me downstairs about finding those things"—she jerked her head contemptuously at the heap of jewellery—"and I just don't believe poor old Tovey ever had anything to do with it at all. And I know my uncle, Mr. Roote, will agree with me. Somebody's trying to put it all on to the poor old man so's to save their own dirty skin. Tovey was as honest as the day. He was rough and he was bad-tempered and he was a bit queer, but he was dead honest. I'd have trusted him with my life—and my life's savings—and I can't say more than that, can I?"

"You'd known him a long time, I suppose?" said Cory.

"Sixteen years," she replied. "He'd known a great friend of mine in the army in the war and he'd heard my friend talk about me, so some years later when he couldn't

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get work, what with his bad head and his temper and unemployment and all, he came and looked me up and I persuaded my uncle, Mr. Roote, to put him in here as caretaker. And here he's been ever since, and I've never heard a complaint against him—not what you'd call a *serious* complaint—and that he was mixed up with a lot of criminals is something I will not believe. That he knew something about them, maybe. Maybe he did know something from being around all the time and seeing a lot of what was going on, and maybe he didn't tell the police like he should have done, but then, if you'll forgive me, Inspector"—she managed to produce one of her arch smiles—"there's a lot of poor people prefer to keep clear of the police for the sake of their own self-respect, sort of. They don't think things out properly and realise where their duty lies. But they don't mean any harm. And that's what old Tovey was like—ever so close about things but dead honest."

Behind the hand that was clawing his features about, Ted started muttering words which, though inaudible, were obviously ironic.

"Well, Mr. Hay?" said Cory.

Ted's head jerked nervously. "I just said it was all nonsense."

"You don't believe in Tovey's honesty?"

"I do not. Consider, Inspector—take the incident of the pearl necklace. He handed it over to Miss Lingard, but how did it ever come to be in his possession? He says he found it on the staircase, but wouldn't say whereabouts. He says he couldn't remember. Does that sound like the truth? Of course it doesn't. I'm firmly convinced that he came by it illegally and produced it with a deliberate purpose."

"And what purpose, I should like to know?" asked Miss Lingard shrilly.

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Ted looked uncomfortable but stubborn. "To threaten you," he said.

"Me?" she gasped, thunderstruck.

Ted nodded.

She jumped to her feet. Her shoes went clack, clack as she strode forward. "And what had he got to threaten me about?"

Ted glanced uneasily at Cory. "Do I get involved in slander if I go on?"

Cory's face suggested he thought it quite likely. "But I know what you're driving at," he said.

"Oh indeed," said Miss Lingard, "and so do I know what he's driving at! He's trying to suggest that that poor old man and me are at the back of all these horrible happenings—me that's bowed to the ground with shame at finding the sort of tenants I've had in my respectable house, all without ever suspecting a thing! But it's all lies, every bit of it! And suppose Tovey did produce that necklace to threaten somebody—I'm saying, just suppose he did—why should it have to be me? I wasn't the only one there when he did it. Besides, if he'd wanted to threaten me he could have got at me any time. But he did it when I was visiting a particular person—and so why shouldn't it have been that person he was threatening?"

"Just so, why not?" said Cory mildly, and with a look of the utmost good nature turned to Kay. "Why shouldn't it have been you, Mrs. Bryant?"

XXI

EVER SINCE THAT INTERRUPTED TALK IN PAMELA'S room Kay had been waiting for Cory's attention to return to her. She remembered that when the sergeant had brought the news of the finding of the jewels in the basement Cory had just started to speak to her. She had felt that he had been about to say something of importance. Now, if she waited, she thought, he would say it. Right from the beginning of the case she had felt his suspicion of her; that was why he had talked to her as much as he had and on the whole been so friendly. But she had never been able to decide precisely of what it was that he suspected her. So, even when Cory softly repeated his question, she said nothing but only returned his look steadily. She was trembling a little but thought that probably this could not be seen.

Squirming round to gaze at her in dismay, Ted exclaimed: "Oh Lord, ducks, I never meant. . . ."

From behind her someone laid a pair of hands on her shoulders. It was Charlie.

"Remember you don't have to say anything if you don't want to," he said.

She nodded and went on waiting.

Miss Lingard tossed her head and said: "As if I'd have left the pearls with Mrs. Bryant like I did if I'd any guilty fears about them!"

And that, Kay realised, had been the flaw in Ted's theory all along, the flaw she had known was there though she had not been able to think what it was.

"Very well, Mrs. Bryant," said Cory, "there isn't much I can say at this point, but you realise, don't you—I've

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tried to hint to you more than once, telling you about the jewel-thieves and so on—that you're in a position of some danger. The murderer must know that you of all people here are most likely to know how the revolver got under the floor—particularly now that we know it was you who recommended Miss Fuller to have a gas-fire installed. That it was you Tovey intended to threaten by producing that necklace I should think is certain—though what he thought he was threatening you about I'm still not sure—that's to say, whether it was for murder or for complicity in the murder. But I'm sure you know more than you'll admit, and I'm sure you're in danger. So I'd think it over carefully if I were you." With a nod to the sergeant to collect the jewellery on the table, he made for the door.

However, as if the sight of Sergeant Whitehead knotting up the jewels in the dirty handkerchief reminded him of something, he paused before he got there.

"Just one other thing," he said. "The only person from this house whom the ironmonger in Tib Street, who has on show a pile of blue and white dusters, can identify as having been in his shop recently is you, Mrs. Bryant. He's vague as to when you went in but he can swear that you've done so."

He went out. Sergeant Whitehead followed him.

Kay let out the breath she had been holding and exploded: "Of course I've been in there! I've been in there often. I was there this morning. I was ordering a new lock for my door—and that reminds me, it hasn't been fixed yet." Suddenly, as she thought of that, a wave of panic swept through her and she wished she had not said anything about it.

Charlie, patting her shoulders lightly, said with a laugh: "He's only trying to scare you. He thinks you know something and wants to frighten it out of you."

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With a snort of contempt, Miss Lingard left the room.

Ted and Melissa, after lingering a few minutes, went out together. Kay would have gone with them if Charlie, catching her eye, had not shown that he wanted her to stay. Irresolutely she let herself be held back.

She strolled to the window. Looking out at the lamps lighting up the dusk in Little Carberry Street, she thought how often she had liked to see the change that came over the street at dusk when its dirt and shabbiness faded into shadow and the old houses were left with their birthright of sober dignity and beauty. Charlie came and stood at her side. She saw how anxious his face looked against the dull blue of the curtains and remembered with a shock that only two days ago she had scarcely realised that he could look anything but mischievously cheerful and content with life.

After a long silence he said to her : " You're frightened, aren't you, Kay ? And you do know something."

" I'm frightened," she replied, " but I don't actually know anything—that's the trouble."

" I don't understand," he said.

" Oh, I don't either, really."

" Has Patrick gone ? " he asked.

" I suppose so. By the way, he's quite sure I did the murders. He seemed to think it's just the sort of thing I do."

Charlie gave a laugh. " Kay, when all this is over——"

" Yes ? "

" Suppose you and I. . . ."

" Oh, you're looking a long way ahead," she said.

" Divorce takes a long time."

" You're going through with that ? "

" Of course."

" You haven't been softening towards Patrick because he turned up to stand by you ? "

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"It isn't a question of softening towards him. He and I just don't suit each other."

He was silent again for a while, then reached out and took her hand. She drew it gently away.

"All right, Kay," he said. "But I wish you'd say just one thing——"

"What?"

"Oh—it doesn't matter. It can wait till all this is over. I think I'll go out this evening and get really drunk."

She smiled. As she went out she heard Charlie drawing the long blue curtains, shutting out the dusk and the lamps of Little Carberry Street.

She went upstairs, but she did not get as far as her room for on the next landing Ted thrust his head out at her, beckoned and hissed dramatically: "You'd better come in here a moment, ducks. Melissa knows who did the murders."

From inside the room came Melissa's voice: "Oh, you are awful, Ted, making it sound silly like that, but I do know, I've known all along."

"You wouldn't require a little thing like some evidence, would you?" Ted asked her pleasantly.

"I've got evidence, lots of it." Melissa had started ironing. She was bending over the ironing-board, performing delicate operations on a pair of satin cami-knickers, not improbably those, thought Kay, which had provided her alibi.

Ted went on mockingly: "Don't tell me you've been snuffling around with magnifying glasses, picking up cigarette-ends and bits of red clay and mysterious seeds of plants that grow only in the Nile valley. And not one of us noticed it, you poor little thing!"

Melissa regarded him scornfully.

"Why don't you *ever* believe anything you don't think

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of yourself?" she asked. "I said I knew who the murderer was and I said I'd got evidence. But if you don't want to hear about it you needn't. You could just go and have a bath instead, because now that Mr. Tovey's dead no one can say the smell on the staircase is him any more——"

"Stop!" said Ted hastily. "Tell us about the murderer. I want to be told. And here's Kay who wants to be told too. Who did the murders?"

"Charlie, of course," said Melissa.

"Oh," said Ted, "Charlie."

"Yes, that's what I said, *Charlie*!" Melissa's tone was acid. "And I thought Kay ought to know, in case she hadn't realised it, because of her being so awfully in love with him. It's really horribly bad luck, but these rebound affairs, they always turn out badly, you know. And it has to be Charlie, you see, because it has to be a man if they're right about Naomi's having been having an affair with somebody, because the only other one in this house is you, and I don't think it's you because around that time, that time when Kay was away, you were awfully occupied with that exotic young woman with the marvellous red feather in her hat, and I don't think you'd have been running them both at the same time. Or"—suddenly she looked at him with misgiving—"would you?"

Ted gave a groan. "That's evidence, is it? Evidence! My dear girl, first, one doesn't automatically get murdered by the people one has affairs with—fortunately. Second, you've said nothing about the jewels. Third, neither Charlie nor I could have put the revolver under the floor, let alone being such fools as to think of such a thing——"

"But that's just the point," cried Melissa, "Charlie *could* have put it there, because even if she knew about it Kay wouldn't let on, all because of being so terribly in love

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with him. Don't you see, it simply has to be Charlie, because I don't think Kay'd do that much for you—no doubt only because she isn't exotic enough and hasn't got a marvellous red feather in her hat, but——”

“Listen,” Ted broke in, “that young woman with the red feather hasn't got anything to do with it. She was a very attractive slab of wench and that's all. Further, I only remember her wearing the red feather once. I liked her hats. She used to buy them for five shillings and do clever things to them herself instead of getting them from gentlemen called Kenneth, or Michael and insist they were cheap at five guineas.”

“But my hats *are* cheap,” said Melissa, “Kenneth always lets me have them cheap—and they're good, so I can have them remodelled dozens of times——”

“Remodelling costing a mere three guineas or so at a time !”

“But they're good, don't you understand, and so it's really very economical ?” In her excitement Melissa had put down the iron and forgotten about it. She was gesturing with both hands. “And I don't like red feathers, even if they do help one to pick up strange gentlemen when one goes to see French films. If I go to see a film I go to see a film——”

“Look out !” cried Kay.

But Melissa herself had realised at that moment that she had left the iron standing on the silk and that from it a hot singey smell was spreading through the room. Snatching it up and seeing its shape printed in biscuit-colour on the smooth oyster tint of the satin, she let a stream of words fall from her lips which made Ted stare at her with a show of disapproval but with much more real pride. When he reproved her mildly she retorted that it was King's English.

“Then the King must know an awful lot of dirty

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words," said Ted. He advanced to look sympathetically at the ruined cami-knickers.

They were both so absorbed in the calamity that neither of them noticed Kay slip quietly out of the room. Neither of them had noticed how white her face had gone or that she was trembling. Neither of them realised that at last she also had decided she knew who had done the murders.

She ought to have gone straight to Inspector Cory. She could hear him downstairs, talking to Miss Lingard. She ought to have gone to him at once and told him everything she knew. But shock made her act unthinkingly. Almost before she realised that she was walking upstairs she found herself in her room, found herself sitting at the table, her head in her hands, her mind at first a painful blank then filling with racing, desperate thoughts.

She had no idea of how much time passed while she sat there. It might have been half an hour or an hour or even longer. She knew that at intervals she grew cramped and changed her position, and presently she found that without her remembering having drawn them, a number of little pictures had grown up on the scraps of paper scattered over the table before her. The pictures for the most part were only her characteristic doodles, but to several of them she had added a neat little drawing of a fly. Here and there also there appeared a spider, while on one scrap of paper the thread of spider's web that had caught the fly was in the form of a noose.

Yet her thoughts had not been on spiders or flies while she was sitting there. They had been going over and over everything that had happened since Naomi Smith had left the house, and she had tried with feverish ingenuity to convince herself that her suspicions were founded on nothing more than a few unlucky coincidences. But there was a macabre comment in those little drawings. With bitter accuracy they reflected what she was feeling.

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When at last she managed to make up her mind what to do the whole house had grown silent. She went downstairs to look for Cory, but the Inspector had gone. That worried her. After some nerving of herself she penetrated down into the basement on the chance that he might be there, but she unearthed not so much as a single constable.

The basement was eerily terrifying. It smelt dankly of unspeakable horrors, of dirt, of decay and of death. To her now it was the smell of murder. She felt that she ought to have recognised that that was what it was when she first moved into the house, and should have been warned by it and stayed away. Now it was too late—to late to change anything, to undo anything.

The place was in darkness but some light from a street-lamp, falling through the area window, showed up faintly the patch of floor where the caretaker's body had lain. She thought that she could even see some stains there, and turned and blundered upstairs again. Behind the doors on each landing, as she passed, there was complete silence. She wondered if everyone had gone out or had simply settled into lonely examination of his own suspicions and fears.

Later she made herself some tea and because she suddenly found that she was extremely hungry, fried some eggs and bacon. Afterwards she settled down to cigarette after cigarette and tried to read, but the attempt was almost completely unsuccessful.

Twice during the evening she went downstairs again to look for the Inspector. She even went out into Little Carberry Street and walked up and down to see if she could attract her bowler-hatted shadow. But the man had either been called off or was neglectful of his duty. Going back to her room she pondered telephoning to Scotland Yard. But after all, what could she say? She

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knew that even now she had no proof; she merely happened to know who the murderer was.

Knowing that, she supposed, proof ought to be forthcoming easily enough. For instance, a trap might be laid. . . . She gave a shiver. Picking up her book, she read several sentences without having the faintest awareness of what they were about. She was afraid, that was the trouble. She was dreadfully afraid.

It was late before she made up her mind to go to bed. When she did she could not sleep. For a long time she lay looking at the faint patch of light thrown up by the street-lamps on to the ceiling and being gruesomely reminded by it of the patch of light she had seen on the basement floor, and her imagination, growing drowsier than she realised, painted in for her a grim picture of the dead caretaker. Later she found it was not the caretaker whose image filled her thoughts, it was Naomi Smith, naked and mutilated, lying in a soft depression among the leafless bushes of the Heath.

Now and then she did sleep for a little. She was asleep, or very nearly asleep, when her bell began to ring. It rang a long, steady note.

Half awake, half asleep, she started up in bed. So Charlie was ringing again to be let in. He had, as he said, gone out to get drunk and as usual had forgotten his key. Charlie was out there on the pavement. A feeling of relief flooded her. Sliding out of bed, pulling on her dressing-gown, she crossed to the window and flung it up.

As she leant out she had only just time to see that although the bell was still ringing steadily as if Charlie were keeping his finger upon it, there was no one down there on the pavement, when from behind her a hand came round to cover her mouth while an arm wrapped itself round her body and began to lever her upwards, outwards. . . .

XXII

IN THE FADING LIGHT OF THAT LATE AFTERNOON IN nineteen-forty-two Little Carberry Street had the tranquility of its desolation. So much of it had been tidied up, put away for ever out of sight and out of memory. To the houses that still stood, the boarded-up windows gave an air of blindness and old age. Not that that air was anything but a deception, for life undoubtedly hummed in those buildings as busily and disreputably as ever.

The house where Miss Lingard had lived with her mysterious uncle, Mr. Roote, had vanished as completely as Number Ten. So had the little café; its foundations, brimming with water, turned into a tank for the N.F.S., looked like an ill-kept, unattended swimming bath. Probably to the children of Little Carberry Street, who appeared undiminished in number, the tank was a great improvement on the café. Probably the ruins of the "Blue Pigeon," covered with notices of danger, were also a source of fascination to them, as of anxiety to their mothers, though from what Kay remembered of those tough, shrill-voiced women who used to hang out of windows to scream at their children, and who used to charge out suddenly on to the pavement to seize some three-year-old ruffian by the ear, anxiety was not likely to be one of their major vices.

Kay wondered how many of those same mothers and children and how many of the old drunks who had sung their way home from the "Blue Pigeon" night after night were still there. The population had always been a shifting one; natural instability, debt, bugs and the law had made tenancies short. Kay thought it possible that there was scarcely anyone there who remembered the murders.

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She did not stay long in Little Carberry Street. Perhaps she lingered less than five minutes. The place would always be ghost-ridden for her. With a last look at the blank, tidy space where Number Ten had stood, she turned away.

A voice spoke from behind her: "If it isn't Mrs. Bryant!"

She turned.

But she had recognised the voice—it was not one that she was ever likely to forget—before she came face to face with the burly figure, the blunt, ruddy features, the direct gaze.

"How do you do, Inspector?" she said quietly.

He held out his hand. Detective Inspector Cory had changed very little, and Kay thought that his raincoat and bowler hat were probably the same as he had been wearing when she had seen him last. Like his clothes he looked a little older and tired, but three years is after all not such a very long period, even if in imagination it has extended immeasurably.

"Come to take a look at your old haunts?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Ah, they had a bad time here," he said. "It doesn't look the same, does it?" Side by side they walked along the pavement. It was at Cory's suggestion that they turned in at the "Lion," the same pub where Kay and Charlie had once sat and talked of murder. The place had been open only a few minutes and there was no one inside but an old woman with watering eyes, drinking gin. Kay thought she looked like the old woman who had been there on that other occasion. No doubt she was the same one.

To Kay's surprise, the Inspector managed to obtain whisky. But probably he was known in the district.

"Well," he said, lifting his glass, "here's luck."

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"I thought you didn't drink on duty," said Kay.

"I'm not on duty at the moment."

There was a silence, then he asked: "And what's become of Mr. Hay and Miss Ivory?"

"Oh, they're married and they've got a baby. And how are your little girls, Inspector?"

He beamed proudly. "Terrors, holy terrors, all three. Believe me, Mrs. Bryant, the modern child is something just terrible. They and their mother are all evacuated; they're in a nice cottage in Devonshire."

"And are you still at Arnos Grove?"

"That's right. I don't keep it looking as spick and span as it used to be, and what with doing the housekeeping I'm letting the garden get out of hand, but I manage all right. I suppose,"—he dropped his voice slightly—"you heard about Miss Lingard?"

Kay nodded. "She was in the house, wasn't she, when it was hit?"

"Yes, poor woman. And so was her uncle, Mr. Roote."

"So there *was* a Mr. Roote?"

"Oh yes, there was a Mr. Roote all right. What made you think there wasn't?"

"I really don't know. It was just a sort of joke at first, because he was quoted at us so often and because none of us ever saw him, then we began half to believe it."

"The unnecessary mysteries people do make for themselves," said Cory with a shake of his head, "when there are real enough ones, going unsolved, to keep them busy. For instance, Mrs. Bryant. . . ." Sipping some whisky, he gave her a curious glance. "For instance, have you ever thought over the mystery of who really did kill Cock Robin?"

After a swift examination of his face, Kay decided that the Inspector was not drunk. She decided also that he was not making a joke.

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With an elbow on the bar and his glass in his hand, he went on reasonably: "You see, it was like this. The other day the wife wrote saying she was coming up to London to see how I was getting along and I thought I'd better do a bit of tidying up before she got here. Well, I was clearing out a lot of mess when I came on an old picture-book of the kiddies, and I started looking through it and I found this rhyme about Cock Robin. Of course I've known it ever since I was a kid myself, but I'd never given it a thought till the other day. Then I read it through and I thought to myself: 'For all we know, that affair was a gross miscarriage of justice. I'm not saying it was, mind you, because my private opinion is that the Sparrow did kill Cock Robin, but all the same, take the evidence. . . . The fact is, there just isn't any. First you get a confession from the prisoner: 'I, said the Sparrow, with my bow and arrow.' But a confession isn't good enough when it's a case of murder; you've still got to prove it. Well, what comes next? 'Who saw him die? I, said the Fly, with my little eye. . . .' You see what I mean? The Fly never saw the murder, he only *saw him die*. But you could see a person die without seeing them murdered or seeing the murderer—couldn't you, Mrs. Bryant?" He drank some more of his whisky, then repeated in a low tone: "Couldn't you, Mrs. Bryant?"

For a moment Kay managed to return his gaze, then she looked down. She did not answer. Cory said nothing either and the silence grew long and tense. Kay would have liked to put down her glass and hurry out into the street. But she waited.

At length Cory went on: "Well, if I'd been that Fly, I dare say I shouldn't have admitted even as much as he did—or was it a she-Fly, d'you think? I rather think maybe it was. I dare say I shouldn't have said anything. I'd have kept my mouth shut about it to the last, par-

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ticularly if they'd got the murderer anyway. There might be circumstances. . . . But I don't think you're interested. What about another whisky ? ”

“ Go on,” said Kay.

“ Shall I ? Well, as I said, there might be circumstances when a sensible Fly would keep mum. That wouldn't make her very popular with the police at the time, but thinking it over from her angle, I can see. . . . Well, suppose it happened something like this, for instance. Suppose this Fly was out one day and suddenly discovered she wasn't feeling very well ; she might have a headache and a bit of a temperature, in fact it might be a touch of 'flu coming on. Well then, suppose she meets somebody, somebody she knows, and this person seems to be in a bit of a queer state herself, all worked up and upset over something, and suppose this person kind of hangs on to our Fly for a bit of support, so to speak. But the two of them don't really know each other very well, so this second person never quite says what the trouble is, only she just won't let go of the Fly who's beginning by now to feel very ill indeed ; her temperature's going up and her head's going round. . . . You understand, I'm just thinking aloud, so to speak ; you don't want to take it too seriously. Well then, they arrive somewhere where this second person suddenly tells the Fly that she doesn't need her any more because she's going to meet somebody else, so the Fly starts off home, thinking this is where she makes for bed as fast as she can get there. And then when she's gone a little way she hears something—perhaps it's a shot, perhaps it's a scream. Anyway, the Fly suddenly gets anxious and goes running back to find out what's happened. But it's getting pretty dark by now and it takes her some time to find anything. Then at last she stumbles on it—the corpse, I mean. This young woman she's been talking to has been shot and stripped and mutilated. But

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the murderer's been interrupted by the Fly coming back and hasn't made a very good job of disguising the identity of the victim. Now this is where we come to an interesting point. The Fly's quite a sensible, level-headed person as a rule, and yet she now acts in a mighty foolish fashion. Myself, I blame the 'flu. I fancy if she hadn't been somewhere near delirious she'd never have acted like she did. Because what does she do? Shout for the police? No, she snatches up the revolver and goes looking for the murderer herself. But she's too late and by and by she finds herself lost in the dark with a revolver in her hand. When she thinks of going to the police she gets frightened because she thinks they won't believe her story, so she just puts the revolver away in her bag and goes home. . . ."

He paused, looking down at the whiteness of Kay's knuckles as her hand gripped the edge of the counter. "Would you rather I didn't finish the story?"

"Go on," said Kay again.

He gave a sigh. "You see, Mrs. Bryant, it more or less had to be you that put the revolver under the floor. You and Miss Fuller were the only ones, properly speaking, who had the opportunity, and I couldn't see why Miss Fuller should go and arrange for it to be found in the very room she was living in, particularly if she was out for a little quiet blackmail. So I fixed on you. And that made me think you were the murderer—when I drew that little picture of the fly that was what I was still thinking. But then you let on that it was you who'd suggested to Miss Fuller that she should have a gas-fire put in, so then I realised that you were the person who wanted the gun to be found, who'd put it where you did so that it should be found and lead to the identification of Naomi Smith's body. You weren't the murderer, but you knew something about the murder. . . . Well, you still didn't seem ready to talk, so that was why I told the rest of them in the

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house how it was you who'd suggested Miss Fuller should have a gas-fire, and then I just waited for the murderer to have a go at you. I spent most of that night in Miss Fuller's room, waiting for your door to open. As for your reason for putting the gun where you did. . . . Well, I suppose it was all more or less like the story I've just been telling you. You found yourself with the knowledge that a murder had been committed and the weapon that had done it in your possession, and you watched the papers and you saw that the corpse in the Hampstead Heath murder hadn't been identified, and then Naomi Smith's room got taken and you had a bright idea—the sort of bright idea that might come to a person who was running a high temperature—of how you could get the revolver found by some completely disinterested people, in such circumstances as would certainly lead to the identification of the dead girl and yet with luck leave you out of it. Incidentally, Tovey must have seen you getting that board up and hammering it down again, and that was why, when news of the murder came out, he threatened you with the string of pearls. He thought you were the murderer's accomplice, and though he didn't mind shutting his eyes at a bit of theft—those jewels under the floor were his perquisites from Mrs. Flower for keeping his mouth shut, we got that out of her when she decided to confess her part in the business—he wouldn't stand murder. You know, I'm sorry for old Tovey."

There was another silence.

Then Kay said: "I've never been able to decide——" But she stopped herself. She had been about to say that she had never been able to decide whether the caretaker's life might have been spared if, instead of losing her head that night on the Heath, she had gone straight to the police with the revolver. Probably not; Charlie Boyce could not have afforded to spare him. For of course the

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murderer had been Charlie. Melissa, in her irrational fashion, had been right. Melissa, too, by accident, had given Kay the clue through which she had come to understand the whole situation. When Kay had smelt the singeing of the cami-knickers on the ironing-board the memory had instantly come to her of Charlie standing in front of the gas-fire in her room, and of how, when she had warned him that his trousers were singeing, he had sprung away, turned, and then. . . . His manner had changed completely at that moment. He had become silent, abstracted, and almost immediately, refusing the coffee he had asked for, had left the room. Kay even then had felt that the apparent reason for that change could not be the real one; she had not been able to believe that Charlie Boyce could feel so much consternation on hearing that she did not intend to divorce Patrick. Now she realised that their talk of divorce had had nothing to do with it. The truth was that Charlie, in turning, had suddenly seen the pearl necklace lying coiled on the mantelpiece where Miss Lingard had left it.

It had not been Tovey or Miss Lingard who had told Mrs. Flower where the pearls were to be found, it had been Charlie who had sent her to fetch them. It had been Charlie, not very successful in his profession and impatient for wealth, who had been working with the gang all along, probably smuggling the jewels out of the country on his frequent trips to the conferences of which he was so fond. It was Charlie who had murdered twice to prevent that fact becoming known.

Somehow, Kay supposed, he had betrayed himself to Naomi. As Patrick had guessed, he must have become her lover during the time that Kay had been away. Naomi must have unlocked the door for him on one of those occasions when he returned home at three in the morning without his key, and then, because she was lonely, or

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because she wanted to experiment, or even because she was already in love with him, had taken seriously his flippant amorousness. And then, through carelessness on his part, or perhaps his vanity, she had found him out. Her first impulse when that had happened had been to get away, away from Charlie, away from the house, away from London. But when she had made all arrangements to get away, her conscience had started pricking her. Had she any right to run away like that? Ought she not to stay and face taking her knowledge to the police, or else attempting to reform the sinner. It was at that stage that she had confided in Pamela, who, seeing the opportunity of profit for herself, had tried to get Naomi out of the way as quickly as possible. But Naomi's conscience had won, and she had made that fatal appointment to meet Charlie on the Heath.

How eager Charlie had been, thought Kay with a bitter pursing of her lips, to unravel the mystery. As soon as the revolver had been found and Naomi's body identified, he had become a veritable detective. Kay remembered all his urgent questioning—how well had she known Naomi, what had she known of her circumstances and interests? It had been only then that he had started acting as if he were in love with Kay. He had used that approach to cover up his attempt to extract from her anything that she might know. He had been certain from the first that she knew something—she or Pamela. One of them, he believed, had seen him commit the murder. All along, in all their talks, he had been trying to find out how dangerous either could be to him.

In some ways he had been very adroit. For instance, he had been very quick in realising that he need not try to explain away his shock on seeing the pearls on the mantel-piece, that by saying nothing he could count safely on having his actions misunderstood. Then he had involved

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Kay in his attempt to find out how much Pamela knew. While apparently endeavouring to find evidence that Pamela had done the murders, he had in fact been trying to discover how dangerous she could be.

Probably he had been inclined to the belief that it was Pamela who had been on the Heath until the moment when Cory had let out to the people in Charlie's room that it was Kay who had put the idea of a gas-fire into Pamela's mind. Then he had known with whom it was that he had to deal. Kay's heart still raced when she remembered that terrible moment by the window when, leaning out, she had realised that her relief at knowing that Charlie was shut out of the house had no foundation, that the ringing of the bell was only a trick of some sort, worked with a match-stick perhaps, to make her go to the window, that Charlie was there in the room with her. . . .

Suddenly Kay stood up, drained her glass and held out her hand.

"It's been very interesting see you again, Inspector," she said. "Thank you for the drink and thank you for clearing up one or two points that have always puzzled me. I'm glad we happened to meet."

He took her hand. "So am I," he said, "I always wanted to tell someone my story of the Fly, just to see how it sounded. When Boyce saw he was caught and chucked himself out of the window instead of you, I knew we'd never get the story out of you—and as I said, speaking unofficially, I dare say you were wise to keep your mouth shut. But I always did want to tell that story to somebody."

THE END



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